

**DIFFICULT ISSUES IN HOMOSEXUALITY IN A
LIBERAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY:
CREATING A TABLE FOR DIALOGUE**

**A Professional Project
presented to
the Faculty of the
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**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry**

**by
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ABSTRACT

Difficult Issues in Homosexuality in a Liberal Christian Community: Creating a Table for Dialogue

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This project presents a transformative educational model that liberal churches may use to help discuss the difficult issues surrounding homosexuality. The model outlines the procedures, through questions, exercises and reflections that will help a liberal church, which has already affirmed the right for homosexuals to participate fully in their congregation, to uncover the diversity of opinion that exists within that congregation. That diversity may include those who do not agree with every aspect of homosexuality and this model is designed to lift that up and promote dialogue about it.

The research method incorporates library research, interviews and questionnaires. The design of the model uses theology, current transformational models, the church context where the research is done, and reflection. The conclusions find that much more diversity exists in this liberal church than thought and that could be significant in moving the process of including homosexuals beyond a vote to an intentional, continuing process of acceptance within any church.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Problem

This project deals with the problem of how to both affirm and promote diversity and dialogue within a church that has made a common justice commitment, i.e. open and affirming stand, about homosexuality.

Importance of the Problem

Most of the dialogue surrounding homosexuality in the church is understood to be in two camps with seemingly no diversity. Most of the dialogical models that are used lift up only the “black and white” of the issue. The sides are conservative and liberal with neither side listening to the other. As Jeffrey S. Siker’s edited work puts it: Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate.¹ Yet we can see that there are more than two sides to the issue.

We can see diversity of opinion in the conservative camp. For example, in the book Homosexuality and Christian Community, we see conservatives like Max Stackhouse in his article “The Heterosexual Norm” arguing for heterosexuality as the societal and Biblical norm while still feeling that homosexuals should not be ridiculed or shamed publicly for who they are.² But what about the diversity of views on this difficult

¹ Jeffrey S. Siker, ed., Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994).

² Max L. Stackhouse, “The Heterosexual Norm,” in Homosexuality and Christian Community, ed. Choon-Leong Seow (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 134.

issue in a church that may call itself liberal, and that has taken a justice stand for the affirmation of homosexuality in the church? Is there a diversity of opinion here? Is everyone under the umbrella of say “Open and Affirming” on board with all the issues? Are there those who do not totally agree with each issue surrounding homosexuality in the church? I have found this to be the case in a progressive congregational church. This indicates that there needs to be some sort of dialogical model to lift up this diversity, especially after the church has taken the justice stand.

Where does a church go in the process after the “vote” is taken and the rainbow flag placed out in front of the building?³ Even under this flag, there can exist a diversity of thought and feeling on this issue. I discovered in my research that there was diversity of opinion in the church where I worked. This church flew a rainbow flag out front as a symbol of unity in acceptance of gays and lesbians. Yet to my surprise, I found that under that flag were opinions that were not in perfect agreement. This was not being talked about at all. This said to me that the process of acceptance of issues in homosexuality existed on a spectrum rather than one side of the other. In order to continue the process there was a need to bring these views to the surface and discuss them. If not, there was a real danger that the process would not move forward as people would be unable or unwilling to deeply discuss these hard issues of disagreement. They might fear embarrassment or they may feel marginalized because they didn’t agree whole-heartedly on the issue.

³ To show their intentionality, some churches put a rainbow flag out in front of the church. This is a symbol to the gay community that this church welcomes gays, lesbians, bi-sexual and transgendered people.

The United Church of Christ has a model that helps churches in the process of determining if they wish to become an "Open and Affirming" congregation. This model consists of a workbook that contains processes used by other churches as well as questions to encourage dialogue. This process is intended to lead the church to vote on the Open and Affirming covenant, yea or nay. However there doesn't seem to be a model that takes the process to the next level: how do we continue the dialogue after we vote? What can help critically reflect on our own diversity of opinion that may exist within our own congregation that has voted to accept and affirm homosexuals? Some agree that homosexuals should be parents, but that homosexuals should not be ministers. Some believe that homosexuality should be affirmed in every way but that homosexuals should not be allowed to raise children. Many of these issues were raised in my research and the church had no real model for dialoguing together. There is diversity within the unity of the rainbow flag of justice.

Thesis

The thesis is that liberal Christian communities, which have made a common commitment for justice about homosexuality, nevertheless reflect a diversity of views and requires a model to examine the transformative aspects of this diversity.

Methodology

The methodology will be to lay the framework, which includes theological and educational approaches, for a transformational model. I will engage in library research to develop the theoretical framework. Data collection will utilize interviews and questionnaires and group discussions. I will also employ practical theology: the connections between theology, educational theory and praxis with a congregation. And

finally design a model drawing on transformational adult education based on the research done.

Work Previously Done in the Field

The educational work done in the field is based on transformative thinking. This pedagogy is used as a way to find connectedness in community that will lead to new ways of thinking and new knowledge. It is emancipatory in nature as Patricia Cranton in her book, Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults puts it and Mezirow says in Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning, “Emancipatory learning [thinking] is often transformative.”⁴ Because transformative thinking frees us from the past approaches to knowledge, it allows us to connect with others who think differently (a multicultural context) and move us toward a new place where God’s creative love can be realized. If God’s creative love is realized then communities can be empowered to work toward their own transformation and perhaps feel that the problems they face are not insurmountable.

Mezirow deals with what he calls *meaning perspectives* which we bring to the table that give each of us our frame of reference for interpreting meanings in any given situation.⁵ It is our *meaning perspectives* that we use (tacitly) to make meaning and interpret our experiences in life. When we bring these perspectives to the table we

⁴ Patricia Cranton, Understand and Promoting Transformative Learning (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994), 16; Jack Mezirow, Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991), 88.

⁵ Mezirow, 15.

usually find that we may clash with other *meaning perspectives* from other experiences, cultures, traditions and social influences.

Mezirow believes that critical reflection is important to the individual and how they think, but neglects to speak of the social power inequalities that exist in adult learning contexts.⁶

Patricia Cranton is in agreement with the goals of this project. Cranton believes there is a “three-part process of questioning assumptions” that lies at the very core of transformative learning theory.⁷ These are awareness of the assumptions, examination of those assumptions and the validity of those assumptions. Content, process and premise reflections are Cranton’s distillation of that process.⁸ This process, I believe, allows the community to lift up the multiplicity of ideas surrounding the issue of homosexuality.

Cranton points out how difficult it is in the first place for someone to be aware, critically, of ones own assumptions. We live a life that for various social and economic reasons that internalize many assumptions so that we really are unaware of why we think a certain way. We say, “Well, it’s just true, that’s all,” or “I don’t know why I think that, but I just feel its right.” This is certainly some of the reactions that people in my research had concerning homosexuality. They felt strongly in their disagreements but had difficulty explaining why. We really have no idea why we bring certain biases to the table because so many of our assumption are tacit in nature. Here is where being open to

⁶ I will not use Mezirow as a primary reference in this paper. While he is important in the field of transformative education, his model is too ideal for my purposes. I do not feel it lifts up diversity in a way that is helpful to my model.

⁷ Cranton, Understand and Promoting Transformative Learning.

⁸ Ibid, 83.

“critical discourse” is so important. Of course, one must deal with defenses and deeply ingrained ideas that make for a very frustrating and sometimes aggravating experience for the learner. That is why, as Cranton points out, it is so important for the questioning to be sensitive and loving and attentive in order for the person to feel safe enough to critically questions her own assumptions.⁹

Cranton points to the idea that talking with friends or colleagues may help facilitate a critical examination of ones assumptions. Questions like, “Why do I think this way,” or “What does this mean if I continue to act this way,” can be looked at in a safe environment. Constant gentle prodding by people one knows and trusts can enable the learner to think critically without their defenses overwhelming them and perhaps shutting down the process. Awareness is very important for critical reflection and transformation. Cranton takes us through steps toward critical reflection of assumptions and concludes that transformative thinking is not a single linear process but one that involves many processes depending on the individual and the group.¹⁰ A sense of empowerment is also important and that comes from the gentle prodding and questioning and support of either the educator or the group or both. It is a delicate and time consuming process that leads to critical reflection which can lead to transformation both in the individual and then the group.

⁹ Ibid, 84.

¹⁰ Ibid, 91.

As Cranton's model is more inclusive and open to diversity of situation and background, her work will better inform my desire to lift up the diversity within this certain community context.

The theology of this project is based on that put forth by theologians who have looked at God as a God in relationship with humankind. The basis of this theology comes from God as Trinity. The relationship of the three parts of the Trinity are such that it may model what humankind needs to reflect in it's own relationship to each other. While the model of the Trinity and how we model our communities may not perfectly reflect each other, they certainly offer a way of dialogue about differences within a supposed unity of thinking. Marjorie Suchocki and other theologians like John Cobb, Jr. and Philip Clayton examine the relational aspects of the Trinity in the book Trinity in Process.¹¹ These individuals look at how the Trinity informs how we look at plurality in the communities of the world.

Suchocki, in her book Divinity and Diversity, refers to the Trinity as "reflecting the image of God" which to her means that if we are created in the image of God we must live "communally and not individually."¹² Because each aspect of the Trinity is unique unto itself, yet works communally through the Spirit in Love, if we reflect that image, which Suchocki asserts, is Trinitarian, then our communities must be diverse and in that diversity be in loving unity towards the good. A relational God creates through relationship with each individual aspect of creation. Each is "called" according to it's

¹¹ Joseph A. Bracken, and Marjorie Suchocki, eds. Trinity in Process: A Relational Theology of God (New York: Continuum, 1997).

¹² Marjorie Suchocki, Divinity and Diversity (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 65-66.

own individuality and responds accordingly. Because there is a diversity of call there must be a diversity of response.¹³ A relational God demands a diversity of creation and therefore, I believe, diversity is in the midst not the margins of creation. This work is a firm basis for the theology of community that is necessary to justify a dialogical model that affirms, in a loving and nurturing way, the complexity and depth of opinions of a church, which is looking to move beyond a mere statement of affirmation of homosexuality.

Relational theology that uses as its basis the historical tradition that the image of God is Trinity forms a firm ground for critical reflection on the varieties of thoughts surrounding this complex and difficult issue. A relational God demands a “call and response” that celebrates diversity of response. Diversity in creation translates to diversity in community even in a community that has made a joint justice statement. This informs my project because I am looking for ways lift up this sort of diversity. The Trinity is diverse in its seeming unity therefore it is only natural to assume that the church community, as the image of God, is diverse within its unity. A relational God creates in the myriad of “calls and responses” of creation, therefore diversity is unavoidable, in fact demanded. That gives the community permission to dialogue about their differences while agreeing to a unifying justice statement

The inclusiveness of liberation theology and the idea that the oppressed and marginalized of society are also loved of God is another theology, which is relational and has been used to promote a theology of inclusive community in the world. The liberation theology of Leonardo Boff in his book Holy Trinity, Perfect Community looks at the

¹³ Ibid., 28.

Trinity as the image of perfect community, diverse yet one a “mystery on inclusion.”¹⁴ Boff proposes that since the Trinity is the image of a loving and inclusive community, different yet together, the human community must be inclusive and diverse if it is to reflect that image. So the oppressed and the marginalized, “difference and distinction” all diversity is equalized and celebrated because we are too reflect the “perfect community” of the Trinity.¹⁵

This is also true in Gay Liberation Theology. Robert E. Goss’s Queering Christ takes the route of the theory of sexual liquidity as not only a way to affirm gay identity and theology, but as a way to show that diversity in sexuality is a valid basis for including gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered and transsexual individuals in creation. While he does not specifically base his theology on the Trinity, he certainly points to the efficacy of diversity in gay theology. In fact, he says it is demanded in gay theology. This is because the “template of sexual identities is not fixed but elastic.”¹⁶ Genderfication is not a fixed identity but diverse and moving, which grounds a theology of diversity even within the homosexual community. A celebration of diversity results if genders and sexualities are not poured in concrete. Sexuality, to Goss, is more about relationships between two committed people. To create a “queer theology” Goss says we must celebrate the diversity of identities that exist in the homosexual world. This is a theology of community, and theology that celebrates the diversity of the Trinity and is reflected in

¹⁴ Leonardo Boff, Holy Trinity, Perfect Community (MaryKnoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2000), 63.

¹⁵ Ibid., 63.

¹⁶ Robert E. Goss, Queering Christ (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 226.

the diversity of the homosexual community. Diversity is demanded if God in community is to exist. The importance of diversity is the basis for Goss's theology. It is therefore an important component to the model being created in this project to help celebrate and affirm diversity in unity.

There have also been dialogical models between diverse communities that inform the model this project is putting forth for liberal communities. The dialogue about homosexuality in the church has been heated and, at times, hateful. But it has changed in the twenty years that it has been in the forefront of issues facing the church. Many books offering respectful dialogue surrounding this issue point to the diversity that exists in all Christian religious communities. Homosexuality in the Church edited by Jeffrey Siker, Homosexuality and the Christian Community, edited by Choon-Leong Seow; Beth Ann Gaede's edited volume entitled Congregations Talking about Homosexuality; and Tex Sample and Amy DeLong's edited volume, The Loyal Opposition, all offer good insights into the diversity and dialogue that is taking place in the church.¹⁷ Each lifts up the complexity of opinions and theories surrounding homosexual issues, both biblical and social, and how people can dialogue without punching each other out. These models can be used to create a framework for discussing these issues in the liberal church because they all help lift up and affirm variety and difference glue which helps us reflect the love and community of the Trinity that at the very core of our Christian Theology.

¹⁷ Jeffrey S. Siker, ed. Homosexuality in the Church; Choon-Leong Seow, ed. Homosexuality and Christian Community (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996); Beth Ann Gaede, ed. Congregations Talking about Homosexuality (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1998); Tex Sample and Amy DeLong, eds. The Loyal Opposition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000).

While these models are looking for ways to transform our thinking, to help us reflect critically on our long held assumptions so that we can reflect the “irreducible diversity of the image [of God]”¹⁸; they tend to put the dialogue into two camps, for and against. They do not lift up the diversity of thought within each camp in an intentional manner. We can see diversity within some of the essays, differences of approach, but how that diversity can help us understand our commonalities on the issues is left out. The hot topic is unity on each side, but the differences and difficulties within those “sides” are not brought to the surface, but simply bubbles underneath. In addition, most liberal churches, particularly the one in my research, while agreeing in whole to affirming homosexuality, have no way of releasing those bubbles of inner tension that could prevent a depth of affirmation that can lead to transformation.

Scope and Limitations of the Project

The scope of this project is limited to research done at the Congregational Church of Fullerton. The data collection included forty questionnaires distributed at the Fullerton church of which eight were returned and five formal interviews. The congregation of the church includes only 40 members.

This project was to include group discussion, which due to time constraints at was not possible. The plan is to formulate the structure of what the group discussion could look like to attain the results theorized in the project. The implementation of the model will not be fully realized due to time limits, too few responses on the questionnaires, and availability to get group discussions together because of those time constraints.

¹⁸ Suchocki, Divinity and Diversity, 68.

This project is not meant to include those churches that do not agree that homosexuals have a place in church or society. It is not meant to reflect a dialogue between conservative and liberal, but to reflect the inner diversity of a liberal church, which believes that homosexuality is acceptable and should be affirmed in the church. It will leave some people out of the discussion, granted, but it may offer the liberal church a way to see that diversity exists in every church, and may help them see their own complexity of views on homosexuality as a way to dialogue with others of radically different viewpoints.

Procedure for Integration

The aim is to construct a model that will facilitate dialogue in the difficult issues of homosexuality in a liberal Christian community by integrating ideas of theology of community and transformational education into a practical dialogical piece, which will help these communities to discover and embrace the diversity that exists under the umbrella of affirmation of homosexuality. The model will be constructed by drawing on the diversity of opinion that was found to exist in a liberal Christian community, which has already taken a justice stand to affirm homosexuals in their congregation, library research done in the field of theology of community, and the model for transformative adult education set forth primarily by Patricia Cranton, as well as the interviews and questionnaires from the church community.

The research is based on the written work already done in the transformational education and theology. The practical research comes from interviews at the church community where I worked, as well as the questionnaires handed out at the church. The questions to be asked in the group discussions will come out of the interviews and

questionnaires done in the fieldwork. These interviews and questionnaires will be analyzed and reflected upon by laying out a framework that will find the commonalities in those tools. The analysis will be the basis for the model created along with the theological and educational approaches already covered in the research.

The model will include how to find out what the problem issues are, through interviews. Of course, the model will first make sure that we understand the boundary of “Open and Affirming” has been discussed and voted on and the group must agree upon this boundary. The model will revisit some of the exercises used in this part of the process and then move past the vote toward other dialogue. The spectrum of opinion must be the primary bases for dialogue in the model. The model will engage those problems with a series of questions that are agreed upon by those interviewed before the actual group discussion begins. Following that a framework for the meeting itself, the space, the ground rules and dates set to meet will be work on with those interviewed who wish to continue the work. The hope is that the meetings will take place over a period of six months, meeting once a week at an agreed upon safe space. The meetings will open with a prayer to center the group in the spiritual so that we call on God to be with us in community.

There will be some initial exercises to develop trust that will encourage the openness needed to dialogue about these issues. Those exercises include improvisational work, group role-playing, and Biblical drama, using passages that deal with community conflicts. There will be reflections after each of these exercises that will help in the direction of the dialogue later in the process. The reflections will be facilitated by open-

ended questions coming out of the exercises meant to get people to reflect deeply and connect to the larger issues to be dealt with in the later meetings.

After those meetings are done then the group, upon agreement by all, will move to narrative work. Here all people will be able to relate their experiences surrounding the issues of homosexuality both in the church and their own lives. These discussions will have definite ground rules set up by the group ahead of time. For example, name-calling will not be allowed and each person must wait until the other is done before responding. In that response, the person must paraphrase, accurately, what the person has just said so that both parties know exactly what has been said and the meanings behind those statements. This will be the body where the metaphorical table for dialogue happens. This will be the longest part of the process and will probably not be amicably “solved” by the group. However the object, as in transformational education, is to be able to think critically enough and be open enough to hear the diversity and find what commonalties are possible.

There will be evaluations and reflections after every meeting to see what has been accomplished and what further work may or may not need to be done at the next meeting. This will help people to know what they have talked about, the diversity that exists where they may have thought there was unanimity, and that what they said was heard and taken seriously. There will be questions included in this project model that will help facilitate these discussions. At the end of the sessions, there will be a dinner and celebration which will include a worship service and a final evaluation, either through face to face dialogue or questionnaire; that will be decided by the group and the second to the last meeting.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 1: Introduction and Chapter Outlines.

Chapter 2: The Theology. This chapter examines liberation theology and theology of community and how it serves as a foundational framework for the project by looking at where God is in community. Looking at theologians like Marjorie Suchocki, Leonardo Boff, Eugene F. Rogers, Jr. and Robert E. Goss and how their theology of Trinity, Relational, Traditional and Gay theologies come together to form a theology of community which is used in the model the project creates

Chapter 3: The Education. This chapter examines the model for dialogue set forth primarily by Patricia Cranton in the area of transformational education and how that model serves as a framework for the project. This chapter will bring the theoretical model of practice into dialogue with the theological pieces of the previous chapter and how this dialogue forms the foundation for the model being created.

Chapter 4: The Situation. This chapter looks at what models for dialogue are currently in us in talking about homosexuality and why they inform, both positively and negatively, to the model this project puts forth. This chapter will relate the previous chapters to these dialogical models and how they influence the positive and negative aspects these models. Why won't the models work in my context? What parts of these models can be used as a template for use in a liberal church that has taken a positive justice stand? Also included are the questionnaires from the church and reflections on the responses.

Chapter 5: The Model. Here is the practical engagement of all the previous chapters. In this chapter the actual model will be presented. The aim of this chapter is to

integrate the dynamic part of data collection, the theological and the educational pieces into a working model for diverse religious communities. The various parts will be set out in detail such as the time frame, meeting agendas, exercises used, boundaries, questions discussed, reflections where the model will go from there. This model will show how all of the preceding chapters on theory and research come together to help the community create a table for dialogue that celebrates the diversity of views around homosexuality and how we may be able to transform our own thinking in relationship to these views.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Reflections. This is a summary of all the previous chapters and a look at the overall efficacy of the model that has been created. There will be some conclusions drawn as to what may or may not have been successful and where I see the project going from this point. Is the table created one that looks sturdy? Will it hold all the dishes necessary for a good meal? Does it allow for everyone to be invited, or does it exclude some and is that exclusion something that will be unavoidable? How did this project affect my own approach to ministry as a gay pastor? Will it be possible for me to bring this model to churches myself, or will I train others to do it? And finally will the model be a truly transformative one that will help churches and communities adequately deal with the difficult issues in homosexuality while celebrating the diversity of views involved in these issues?

CHAPTER 2

The Theology

A theology that grounds transformative adult learning must necessarily be one that is relational. Transformative education, as will be explored in the next chapter, is education that comes from our relationships with others in dialogue. We learn about others and ourselves through deep, intimate contact with our neighbors who may not necessarily agree with our thinking. In order to move toward the good of the community, then, we need to be in community with each other. We need to connect in the struggle that will transform the community. The theology of this project is one that includes a relational God. This is a God who is active and creative in relationship with creation and therefore in the community of those who profess a faith in the living God of creation.

What is a relational God? How does that kind of theology relate to transformative adult education and this project? It is important first to look at what is meant by a relational God. I base my ideas using parts of Process and Trinitarian theology. Also, I will be looking at how Queer Theology¹ connects to both Trinitarian and relational theologies and how these ground my project. Most of my theory is based on Marjorie

¹ Queer Theology is a liberation theology that seeks to free gays, lesbians, bisexual, and transgendered persons from the tradition that excludes them because of sexual preference. It seeks to look at Biblical texts that deal with homosexuality in the context in which they were written and find new meanings that are inclusive rather than exclusive. Queer Theology is based on relationships, which are not simply sexual, but the total relational commitment between two human beings who love each other. This theology, like feminist and black theologies, seeks to free gays from the shackles of heterosexual and homophobic interpretations that surround current theologies, and help them find a relationship to God that celebrates who they are and allows them to fully participate at the banquet table.

Suchocki's books Divinity and Diversity and In God's Presence,² as well as Jeanyne B. Slettom's The Process Perspective.³ These books deal in an understandable way with relational theology that comes out of the work done in process theology. I will also reference Leonardo Boff's book Holy Trinity, Perfect Community as a way of connecting the image of the Trinity with the image of the community in the transformational model. Robert E. Goss's book Queering Christ also contributes to this chapter, looking at the relational theology of the gay community and how it connects to the other theologies examined in this chapter. Finally, I will look at how all of these help create a theology of community which reflects the relationship between God and creation and the model of transformational adult learning used in this project.

Dancing with a Relational God

God works in relationship with God's creation and works within the limits of creation's response to God's call. A relational God works in connection with creation. Suchocki says that God is very involved with creation, in a dance where God and humankind are partners in a creative, loving relationship.⁴ Relational and process theologies rely on connections between people; which gives people value and meaning and the power to be a loving creative community.⁵ We know God through our

² Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, Divinity and Diversity (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003); In God's Presence (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1996).

³ Jeanyne B. Slettom, ed. The Process Perspective, by John B. Cobb, Jr. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003).

⁴ Suchocki, In God's Presence, 19.

⁵ Suchocki, Divinity and Diversity, 25.

relationships with others and God is able to work God's creative purpose for the world through those relationships. Thus, a relational God is a God in community.

God creates in community through what Suchocki terms, "call and response."⁶ By this she means that God responds to each and every human response. That calls for God to be diverse, as each human response is different from every other human response. God first calls to creation, then hears creation's response and calls again in the context of that response. My response to God is different from my friend's response therefore God calls me in my own unique context. This call is to my best possibilities. In a community God is active in calling and responding to all the diversity that is possible in that community. That means that we must affirm the diversity in order to affirm the relational God that is active in it.

According to Suchocki, God continues the "call and response" of creation, building on each response and call so that creation moves closer to the greater good that God desires.⁷ That is how creation comes about in a relational theology. Creation is in relationship to God through that call and response and communities are in relationship to each other the same way if we indeed are God's imitative creation. A God who hears every response and issues a creative call for the greater good to those responses can only be active, I think, in a community that lifts up their diversity and affirms it as they try to move toward their own greater good.

⁶ Suchocki, Divinity and Diversity, 28.

⁷ Ibid, 28.

A relational God is “deeply involved in the world.”⁸ If we look at God in this way then we know that our responses may affect how God can bring God’s desired good to the world. God has chosen in this “call and response” to share power with us. This is not a God with power over, but power with, this is relational theology. God, in fact, is limited in God’s power to bring the good by the limits of our own power to respond.⁹ We, as dance partners with God, must respond to keep the dance going if God is going to lure us to our greater good. In other words, if we do not try to accept the dance, then God can do nothing to creatively bring us to the floor to participate. If we accept the dance but do not do our part and follow, we lose the freedom of creativity that is uniquely ours and become merely non-questioning robots. But if we follow and lead and hold our own in that creative dance, then God can work creatively within us to bring us to our full potential. We respond in our fully creative way to God’s call to us and then God responds as fully as we do to bring us to our greater creative good.

This dance works in our communities where we need to interact creatively with each other in order to move the community to its greatest good. If we believe God’s dance is based in God’s creative and affirming love, then our community dance must reflect that. If indeed we accept the relational theology of community, then we must participate creatively in the dance. We partner with each other, equally, especially in a community that wishes to grow to its fullest. All must participate in the creative dance as fully as our responses allow. We cannot do it alone, though. We must work and

⁸ Suchocki, In God’s Presence, 19.

⁹ Ibid., 21

struggle together to create the dance because we don't dance alone, going off as we please, colliding with others and then moving on, but together in unity remaining still maintaining our individual uniqueness. God demands diversity in "call and response" creation, so we, if we accept this, must respond accordingly or we may fail to achieve our full potential.

God relates to the reality of this world in a relational theology.¹⁰ A relational God is not a God separate from the world, but one actively involved in the world. God does not simply create a bunch of rules and then stand back and expect all to follow, judging and punishing accordingly, in a relational theological world. No, God is actively involved; wooing us to our greater good in a wonderful, if difficult, dance of creative love. In a transformative context this is essential. In transformative learning, as the reader will find in the next chapter, the dance we do with each other will determine how we learn and how we change the paradigms that have shaped our lives and our responses. It is a dance that affirms difference, though. It is a dance that must have difference in order to hear all the stories needed to shape our response and stories that call us to our own greater good, and the community's.

Transformational work is relational and in fact, must be relational. So a relational God seems to be a God of transformation. Since a relational God is at every level of creation, because of the different responses God makes, then diversity is the fuel of God's wonderful creative power. Therefore, for transformation to happen, each and every

¹⁰ Ibid., 24.

response of those in community must be heard. Diversity is needed in order to know the most creative and loving response that will lead to the community's transformation. We know each other because we listen to each other. That knowing and listening bring us to new creative knowledge that can lead us to the greater good of the community. That greater good is the response to God's call. Because God is involved in each person's own creativity, if we fail listen to each and every person deeply and honestly, we do not hear God's call. We must affirm the diversity of community in order to hear the creative call of the relational God.

Trinity as the Relational Image of God

The Trinity is a "mystery of inclusion."¹¹ The Trinity demonstrates that while there are differences, unique differences, the Trinity is yet one working together for the good of humanity and creation. If that is indeed the image of God that we have, and then if we are created in that image we must be inclusive and diverse, yet unified in our communities. The traditional Father, Son and Holy Spirit of the Trinity have been thought of as three unique "persons" yet all working together in community as one God. This communion breaks down the barriers of exclusion and discrimination and demonstrates that all are equal participants in the community of creation just as the Three are unique, yet equal partners in the Trinity. Boff says this means that all "goods are shared."¹² Everyone is equal because of their differences, not in spite of their differences. In other words, diversity is an essential facet of the Trinity, not a result. We, in

¹¹ Boff, 63

¹² Ibid.

community, must recognize that diversity in unity brings equality and empowerment.

Diversity is not just difference; it is difference with power to create.

The Trinity is God in relationship. It is difference that creates the power, not sameness. It is the three unique entities that give creative power to the Trinity, not the fact that there are three simply working together as one; that would be perhaps a divine oligarchy. There is no one part greater than the other and their differences; their uniqueness is what gives their unity strength. All are heard and all participate in the process equally, but all work in concert based on creative love. Each is accountable to the other, just as in community we are each accountable to those around us.

So if we are created in the Image of God, we accept this view and if we look at the communal basis of the Trinity we must reflect accordingly. The image of this God can only be reflected in community where difference is essential and diversity is affirmed in order to fulfill God's desire for the best possible world. The traditional image of God in Christianity is Trinitarian and so if we call ourselves Christian then we must reflect that image. Suchocki, like Boff, suggests that this image is communal not individual.¹³ We cannot reflect the image of God individually; we must do it in community. Further, it is not simply by being in the community, but truly relating to that community and working toward the great good within and through that community that reflects the nature of the Trinity. That is the way the Trinity works in creation and the way we must work in community if we are the image of God on earth.

¹³ Suchocki, Divinity and Diversity, 66.

There is also an “irreducible diversity” that is the Trinity and is therefore reflected in creation.¹⁴ In other words, we are created differently just as the Trinity is comprised of three different “persons.” That difference is irreducible; it cannot be changed or reduced to one single thing. Difference is what makes creation, it is what makes God’s “call and response” diverse and creative. We cannot erase the fact that we are different, but the Trinity gives us a way to take that diversity and difference and work together in a loving, creative and hopeful way to bring the best possible creation into existence. God works with our difference because God must in order to get the best response, and we must do the same.

To be created in the image of God means to be created in community, recognizing our irreducible differences and affirming them as to give them power to work in unity toward the best possible creation. The Trinity shows us the way in which God wishes us to dance. We affirm and lift up our differences because that is what creation must do. We cannot erase our differences so that we all think the same just as we cannot all look the same. We must celebrate difference because that reflects the image of God and we are those reflections.

Queer Theology as Relational

Queer theology comes out of the liberation theologies before it. Feminist and Black liberation theologies of the sixties, like Queer Theology are theologies on the margins. They lift up the oppressed and posit that God loves the oppressed and excluded first and foremost. They are theologies that found their identities as valued persons in a

¹⁴ Ibid, 68.

heterosexual, white Christianity and overturned the tradition hierarchy that had existed in the church for centuries. In the seventies, women moved the church away from its male-dominated hierarchy and that meant a larger role for them. They could now be ministers and take a much larger role in the shaping of the church. For blacks it has meant liberation from white-dominated Christianity and a God who loves them equally. These theologies have brought liberation, as well as struggle and pain, to the church, but have lifted up the much-needed difference that exists in the Christian faith. Queer theology does the same, although it blurs the lines of sexuality and spirituality perhaps more than any other theology. But first, as with feminist and black theologies, it has had to reconstruct those texts used by the church for centuries to exclude them from the church and deny them a place as gifted creatures of God.

Of course, doing this reconstruction raises the hackles of the traditional-minded because it upends the balance of power, just as feminist and black liberation theologies did and are doing. But what this reconstruction does do, I think, is lift up that diversity and irreducible difference that is the Trinity and community. Difference cannot be excluded from the theology of community, from that relational connection between God and creation and creation and community. Refer to Robin Scrogg's book, The New Testament and Homosexuality¹⁵ or Walter Winks edited volume, Homosexuality and the

¹⁵ Robin Scroggs, The New Testament and Homosexuality (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

Christian Faith¹⁶ for a thorough look at all the “clobber texts” used as arguments against diversity in the Christian community.¹⁷ It is important to look at these texts in a way that includes the whole of the Biblical story and God’s love for all of creation.

Queer Theology attempts to get at the root of the separation of sexuality and the Christian faith. It attempts to “deconstruct the antisexual rhetoric that evolved in Christianity in the formative years.”¹⁸ Christianity adopted the NeoPlatonic belief that the body was not as good as the “spirit” or intellect, and by the second century C.E. had determined anything that had to do with the “flesh” was abhorrent. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and other church fathers that believed that we must be perfect, as God is perfect lifted this up. That meant sex was only for procreation and nothing else. The body was not beautiful, it was merely a vessel, a temple to be purified and not defiled by non-procreative sexual experiences. Desire and pleasure became bad words in Christianity. Since Augustine’s proclamation of the evils of sexual pleasure, we have become a religion fearing the body and its wonderful pleasures. This is what Queer Theology seeks to bring to light so that we can move away from the ‘procreation only’ sexuality to the sexuality of relationships that Queer Theology believes is more inclusive and celebrative of the diversity of creation.

¹⁶ Walter Wink, ed. Homosexuality and Christian Faith (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

¹⁷ “Clobber texts” is a term for those verses in the Bible that have been used by people to exclude homosexuals from the church and from the Christian Faith. There are only five or six in the entire Bible and they are used over and over again as weapons to beat down and oppress homosexuals. “Texts of terror” are another name for them.

¹⁸ Goss, 142.

This sexuality of relationships allows for the loving diversity of every member of creation because it moves away from the heterosexual, hierarchical model of sex to continue the species, to a more inclusive sexuality based on loving, intimate relationships between two created human beings. It seeks to point to the giftedness of all creatures and that those creatures are endowed with sexuality that is fulfilled in relationship, not merely in procreation. As Goss points out, procreation can take the form of adoptions and raising children, whether the parents conceived those children or not.¹⁹ Procreation means that we fulfill the creational commitment by having children (or adopting them) and raising them in a loving, relational atmosphere to be a creative part of the world around them. This is not exclusive to heterosexuals if we keep the idea of relationality and diversity as the model for our community. It does not exclude heterosexuals either, but includes all members of God's created community because it is about connectedness through relationships and sexuality, which includes all sexual relationships that occur between two committed and loving human beings.

If relationships are not just for procreation, and sexuality is part of the wonderful diversity of creation, Queer Theology represents a viable grounding for relational theology and the theology of community mentioned earlier. A relational God is involved in the "call and response" of every part of creation and that means that God speaks to each creature as it is to be spoken to and responds accordingly. There is no "right" way that God calls creation to be the best it can possibly be because each part of creation is

¹⁹ Ibid., 104.

called according to its irreducible difference. Queer theology therefore is part of that difference that God calls to and is an essential element of the relational theology on which to base our model for dialogue. Translesbigay²⁰ people are part of the irreducible difference that is in the image of the Trinity and elemental to an inclusive, relational theology that allows deep and loving dialogue to occur.

Conclusion

We have discussed how a relational God is important to the theology of community used in the model for dialogue in this project. If we believe that God is involved in the “call and response” that Suchocki posits,²¹ that God’s call is to every single creative moment of creation, and that difference that exists within creation, we must believe that diversity and difference are essential elements of that creation. God is a relational God in theology of community. God is only known through connections between persons in that community and that connection must include the glorious diversity in those connections.

If the Trinity is based on communality and not individuality, then in order to live the image of God we must live it in community. Since the Trinity is based on the uniqueness of each part, working as one, then our reflection must celebrate that uniqueness, or difference, as well. The Trinity is community Boff says,

²⁰ Translesbigay is a combination word, which I came across while reading Goss’s book. It is a way to be all-inclusive in referring to the diversity that is in the gay community.

²¹ Suchocki, Divinity and Diversity, 28

and that means we too must be a community. Sameness is not what theology of community is about, nor is it what the Trinity is, if we accept the idea that the “persons” of the Trinity are separate and unique powers that dance together in the unity of love. If we have difference, then all those excluded before must be included now. And that means that the dialogue can happen because we have grounded our discourse in the belief that we reflect the Trinitarian and relational image of God.

Relational theology and a relational God must be inclusive and celebrate the wonderful difference that makes up creation. Every creature responds to God’s call as it can and God responds according to what is possible in that creature. That means that difference is simply the basis of creation. So inclusiveness would seem to be a given. But that inclusiveness is not just a “melting pot.” It means that difference is what makes creation and difference is not to be merely tolerated, it must be struggled with and relied on to bring about the relationship that best reflects the image of God. If difference is shunned, then so is the relational God we have spoken of in this chapter. If difference is merely accepted and then the group moves on its merry way, we are not reflecting the image of God. Difference is the basic component of any Christian community and it is that difference or diversity that must be dialogue in order to bring transformation that reflects a God that is the dancing partner with all creation. A God that woos creation to the best it can possibly be through the love that that God shares with creation.

Queer theology can be integrated into this theology of community, because it celebrates difference. It celebrates the multisexualities that are part of the irreducible differences of God’s creation. It also reflects critically on the Augustinian assumption

that sexual pleasure is bad and must be shunned. That sexuality is only for the procreation of the species does not celebrate the differences that are irreducible in creation. Queer theology looks at the possibility that procreation can mean more than just sex to have children, but can be about adopting children and raising them in a loving, relational environment so that they become a contributing member of the community of human kind. Any loving relationship can procreate because it is no longer simply sexual actions between a man and a woman that constitute procreation. Commitment between two loving persons, be they same or different sex, can raise children. If we look at procreation as relational as opposed to just sexual, then any committed couple can raise children and continue the species.

In addition, Queer Theology brings to the discourse those on the margins. Like other liberation theologies it gives voice to a minority. It brings difference to the table, as do feminist and black theologies, which is essential to the life of the community and to the success of transformational adult learning. The church community reflects God's desire for creation. Creation is diverse and the relational God posited in this chapter celebrates and interacts with that diversity. The queer community is a part of that diversity if we see difference as the underpinning of both relational theology and transformative adult learning. Transformation happens when the tension that exists in difference is affirmed and named and struggled with to bring something new to the community. The margins are where the tensions of creativity and difference exist. The relational God is there and so must be the community.

A relational God and relational theology form a theology of community necessary for transformative work and the grounding for this project. The discussions must come from a lifting up of difference and by the affirmation of diversity. No one is the same and God relates to each unique part of creation differently. If we reflect the image of that relational God then we too must speak and listen to each difference. We must be called to that difference and respond in a loving creative way. God in Trinity is communal. God as Trinity demands difference and that difference is its loving strength. So it is with the community that is working with the difficult issues surrounding homosexuality. As a church it must reflect the presence of the relational God by being with difference, recognizing its efficacy in transformational work, and intentionally affirming and celebrating it in order for change to occur.

CHAPTER 3

The Education

“Connectedness—to God and to that which God created—is the essence of life.”¹

The theology of community discussed in chapter one provides an excellent basis for using transformative adult learning as a model for this project. God and community are in relation with one another. God’s image is diverse (see Chapter 1 on Trinity and community) and we reflect that image in ourselves and in our community. What we believe comes largely out of how we are formed in community. Transformative learning comes out of our relationship to community. Since our theology is relationally based, so must be our education since both involve relationship and the importance of diversity.

“Connectedness,” as Schrock-Shenk points out, is essential to creation, as she believes God intends it. Ideally, we work together as a community to find those things that connect us and thus hold the fabric of society together. A relational God holds creation together by connecting with every aspect and every level of creation. If, as Suchocki says, we reflect that “irreducible difference” that is the Trinity, connection through diversity is an integral part of that creation. We lift each other up as unique persons connected by our being children of a creative and loving God. Transformative adult learning lifts this up. It connects us in our uniqueness so that we can better understand our relationships in community. It transforms us by opening our eyes to each other’s stories through deep dialogue and discourse. It enables us to think critically both about what we hold as our values and those of others.

¹ Carolyn Schrock-Shenk and Lawrence Ressler, Making Peace with Conflict (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1999), 25.

Cranton talks about the freeing nature of transformative education.² This freedom lets one open one's mind and let go of our long held assumptions and epistemologies and allows one to connect with others who think differently. This in turn can open our minds to new knowledge where God's creative love can be realized. If, as pointed out in chapter one, God's relational love is incarnate in community, then this freedom can empower individuals and groups to work toward their own transformation as well as those of the people who differ with them. This can go a long way in the discussion of difficult issues such as homosexuality in the church community. If we find God at the center and connect with that creative love, perhaps through transformative education we can begin a dialogue that affirms our differences, and in those differences, find commonalities.

Mezirow and Transformative Theory

Jack Mezirow is one of the most important figures in the development of transformative adult learning. And while his theory is not a basis for my model, I believe it is important to mention his contribution. His theory of "meaning making" in community and his explanation of what it means to think critically and question our own basic knowledge of the world around us serves as the basis for most models of education that are being discussed today.³ Our way of looking at the world can be distorted; the way we have acquired our knowledge is influenced by our context. That context differs from others and usually clashes when contact is made. In the arena of homosexuality, we see this most prominently in discussions about the "natural order of things." The

² Cranton, Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning, 16.

³ Mezirow, Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning, 88.

normative order is heterosexuality because that is what everyone has learned in the context of his or her biblical and social upbringing. It is so much a part of us, almost genetic, that we do not question how we acquired this knowledge or whether it is accurate. These are our “frames of reference” to which Mezirow refers.⁴ The knowledge we bring to the table is that which we have acquired in our own context and it collides, sometimes rather roughly, with the knowledge of those people that is different from ours.

This collision is one of the points where critical reflection needs to happen, but, as Brookfield points out, we must first understand the dynamics of our own group. We need to ask who holds the power and how does that power inform our relationship with each other?⁵ This determines how we discourse about the ideologies we hold relating particularly to homosexuality. We tend to speak in ideologies when we dialogue and the result is a polarization of right and wrong. We do not question our knowledge. We do not ask ourselves why we think this way or why someone thinks differently from us and just as fervently. We do not think critically unless we call those deep held beliefs into question and truly struggle with the differences that exist within ourselves and between each other in community. Only if there is a major movement in an individual that causes a deep and basic change in ones views does transformative education take place.

⁴ Ibid., 15.

⁵ Stephen D. Brookfield, “Transformative Learning as Ideology Critique,” in Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress, by Jack Mezirow and Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 136.

Mezirow and Brookfield both believe that this major movement must be a change in one's paradigm or in "one's assumptive clusters."⁶

Mezirow sets the ideal for us, but from there we part company. Not everyone learns in the same way, is well informed, is open to change, or is affected the same by power dynamics. People have different psychological frameworks that affect the way they see themselves and their relationship to the world. How do people learn? Are we all taught in the same way? Of course not, we each have our own uniqueness, our own context, our friends, family, school and church environments that shape the way we learn things as well as the things we learn.

Mezirow believes that our environment influences us. That includes what we are taught growing up, and how we learn in groups to react to certain social and moral beliefs. How we acquire knowledge influences how we dialogue with others different from ourselves. Transformative education means a fundamental change in all of these so that we become something new and different in our basic selves. In other words, we are changed, as Paul on the road to Damascus; we are turned one hundred and eighty degrees from what we were. This, and only this, is transformative. Brookfield states anything less than this is a misuse of the word, a misunderstanding of how deep and genetic change must be to be called transformative.⁷

I believe that while this change in thinking is deep and perhaps epiphanal, it is still important to note that it takes time. Just as Paul was constantly torn between his upbringing and his call to bring people to the message of Christ, transformation is a

⁶ Ibid., 139.

⁷ Ibid., 140.

process that is never complete. This is one reason why Brookfield takes issue with the use of the word today; it has come to mean the end of the dialogue. We have been transformed, so we are finished.⁸ It takes time and this must be stressed in the model used. When discussing the difficult issues surrounding homosexuality, no one is likely to have a moment of revelation so transformative they can announce the end of the dialogue. In this project even people who have made a statement of justice and have gone through the struggle of the process of creating this statement may still not be finished. There is more that needs to be done and the transformation, while earth-shaking, can never be accomplished as quickly.

Cranton's Lens

Patricia Cranton believes transformative adult learning involves a type of theoretical model that must look deeply at the basic assumptions we hold dear.⁹ We need to be aware of our assumptions, we need to look at them critically and compare them in the light of assumptions held by others to see if they remain true to the situation being discussed. "Content, process and premise reflections" are Cranton's distillation of that process.¹⁰ This is not as simple as it sounds considering the multiplicity of assumptions brought to the table.

It is difficult, noting Brookfield, Mezirow and Cranton, for someone to be aware enough to look critically at their long-held beliefs. All the knowledge we gain throughout our childhood and early adult life is seemingly set in stone and is difficult to

⁸ Ibid., 141.

⁹ Cranton, Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning, 83.

¹⁰ Ibid.

separate and examine in order to make judgments of their validity in the context of the community we are in at the moment. We live a life that, for various social and economic reasons, internalizes many viewpoints so that we are unaware of why we think a certain way. We say, “Well, it’s just true, that’s all,” or “I don’t know why I think that, but I just do.” In discussions of homosexuality, we usually refer to our tradition and/or the Bible and say, “Well, the Bible says it’s wrong and so it must be,” or “My church says it is wrong, and I believe that too.” In addition, our families “values” teach that marriage is between a man and woman and that is what the family is, exclusive of other models. This comes to us as part of our social and religious history so it is very much basic to what we are all taught. The system teaches it through schools, churches, and families. So we do not question these things, they are just a part of life; just the way things are.

We really have no idea why we bring certain biases to the table because of the tacit nature of our assumptions. One of the ways Cranton helps this project to deal with the difficulty of being open to looking critically at our assumptions is through psychological thinking.¹¹ Our predisposed psychological views “...form[s] our habit of mind.”¹² We grow up forming our frame of reference in part by individuation, meaning separating from the group to find out who we are and then moving back into the group better able to cope with other people’s thinking in a deeper way.

¹¹ Patricia Cranton, “Individual Differences and Transformative Learning,” in Learning as Transformation, by Jack Mezirow and Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 182.

¹² Ibid.

When we separate, we learn to question who we are in relation to the group and how we approach and engage our differences. However, we can never completely understand the other person, as we are who we are, unique, separate and different. This creates the majority of difficulty in dialoguing about difference. We have a hard time understanding the other person because of how we see our way in the world. This predisposition to our world is our psychological lens through which we see the community. Changing those lenses involves awareness, which is difficult to achieve except through the critical reflection and tectonic change needed in transformative adult learning.

Cranton continues by describing how our psychological makeup influences transformative learning. We take the reflections we do into ourselves and look deeply at how that affects who we are and what we have learned in our own lives. We are influenced by how we react rather than how the outside world reacts. If we objectify everything and put it outside ourselves we are influenced by what the world thinks, and how we must fit in rather than society fitting in with our world. These two approaches are not either/or according to Cranton but on a “continuum.”¹³ People have a diversity of feelings on issues and look at them through the lens of that diversity. One may react subjectively to their feelings of homosexuality saying, “I don’t feel right about this, it doesn’t sit well with my upbringing,” or objectively and say, “Well, the Bible and the church say it is so, so it must be true, no questions asked.” How we react to learning is different because we react different to different stimuli.

¹³ Ibid., 184

Individuation, objective and subjective, is important to Cranton's approach to adult learning as well as my own. As we become self-aware, we separate from the collective in order to be better able to come back to the community a more authentic person. We will be able to reflect more honestly and deeply on the differences of opinion that exist between us if we understand our own differences. We look critically at who we are apart from the group and rejoin so that we have a better perspective of our biases toward learning in the community. This is a process that continues throughout life, a constant backing away from and then moving towards new community. It never stops, as is true of adult education and transformation. If a person simply stays within the group, objectifying everything and everyone and never looking inside, she may never find a voice or be able to fully participate in the discourse of the group.

But it is also important to Cranton and to myself that in order for this critical self-thinking to take place, the surrounding community must want to work toward this transformation as well. Talking with friends or colleagues who want to struggle with the issues of homosexuality in a deeply honest and sometimes painful way can help facilitate transformative dialogue without giving up.¹⁴ If we feel alone and isolated in the group, we will give up as surely as we are human. We cannot survive in isolation if we are to move forward in the process. We need like thinkers, advocates, and people willing to work for change or the spark of transformative thought will be extinguished.

This "like-minded" group also allows us to feel safe and protected within the group. But "like-minded" does not mean conformity, but finds commonalities while lifting up the differences and respecting those differences in each other. This will

¹⁴ Cranton, Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning, 84.

facilitate our critical thinking, honesty and openness when we know we will not be judged harshly for our stories. We can gently encourage each other to look at our assumptions in this sort of group. We are more likely to feel affirmed enough to really question each other and more importantly ourselves. Awareness like this is very important for critical reflection and transformative work. Cranton takes us through steps toward critical reflection on assumptions and concludes that transformative thinking is not a single linear process but one that involves many processes depending on the individual and the group.¹⁵ A sense of empowerment is also important and that comes from the gentle prodding and questioning and support of the group and the leader or facilitator. It is a delicate and time-consuming process that leads to critical reflection, which can transform both in the individual and the group.

Stringer and Transformative Learning

Ernest Stringer gives us a model, which helps as another aspect of transformative adult learning. He outlines step-by-step how one can achieve transformative thinking within any group or community. While every situation is different due to different contexts and the people involved in those contexts, Stringer offers much to undergird any model of adult learning. Like Mezirow and Cranton, Stringer believes that transformative learning involves a constant and deep reflective process that he calls “look, think, act.”¹⁶ This means that the group or community looks at the problem, reflects critically and deeply on the problem and then puts it into practice, much like

¹⁵ Ibid., 91.

¹⁶ Ernest T. Stringer, Action Research, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications, 1999), 18.

Cranton's model of questioning assumptions. It is a difficult process (as I believe it should be), and as Cranton would agree not very linear. This process is represented by Stringer as an "interacting spiral" that continues throughout every stage of the discourse.¹⁷

Stringer's model seeks to change the power dynamics within any adult learning or research situation so that those participating can be empowered and not exploited. The ends of transformative education come from collaborative, power relationships fostered in the process and facilitated by the leader or researcher. The power dynamics are more horizontal than vertical, and more power sharing exists than in the traditional type of educational pedagogy. Stringer looks to find viable and sustainable solutions to groups in conflict, solutions that may not be final but cause deep change for all involved.¹⁸ In other words, finding a final solution is not necessarily a part of the transformative model for Stringer, or for me, but those involved may have arrived at a new place where they respect difference and understand more of why they think the way they do. While advocacy for homosexuality in the church is a motivating force for this model, and me it is more important to keep the dialogue going. That will help direct the dialogue toward a more healthy and equitable solution devoid of the rancor and hostility that may have been present at the beginning. Above all is the importance of the well-being of the community.

¹⁷ Ibid., 19.

¹⁸ Ibid., 21.

Stringer's three-stage model is helpful in my own model. While this speaks to the leader sometimes more than the group, it is important for me in that it helps guide me in the construction of my questions and process for dialogue in difficult and conflicting issues like homosexuality. First we "look" at the situation. What is the problem in the community? In my instance, why is the church not taking more stands on related issues such as adoption, same-sex unions or ordination? We need to find out what the problem is and everyone should agree in principle with that. Here we can see where Mezirow's "meaning perspectives" come into line with Stringer and myself.¹⁹ Stringer discusses the difficulty of analyzing perspectives when so many are brought to the table, and how difficult it is for people to examine their assumptions in public. Stringer recommends a process of talking individually to the participants so that any fears may be allayed before entering into the process. In other words, people will know that going into the dialogue they will be heard and not judged. The facilitator and the group can gain an idea of the complexity and diversity of the problem that will be discussed in the group. It gives the group a feeling of trust and safety before even beginning the process. This is essential for the process to take place. People will likely not want to come to any table or help create one unless they know exactly what is being discussed and how their story will fit.

The second part of Stringer's model is to "think." This is the difficult and time-consuming effort of looking at our assumptions. Thinking is the hard work, the sharing of stories and being open to difference. In the discussion of homosexual issues this involves people's experiences with these issues (if they've had any) and their personal reaction and feelings. Here the facilitator would ensure that the group has a chance to

¹⁹ Mezirow, Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning, 88.

listen and reflect on what is said without judgment or name-calling. Hard and deep discussion will take place in this part of Stringer's model. Difference is wrestled with here. This part is helpful as Stringer guides us through a model that helps us see both visually and mentally what is at stake and who are the stakeholders. Here agenda and egos can clash and all sides must be heard equally. This part may be the hardest to sustain without the community support mentioned earlier.

Finally, we come to "act," where Stringer outlines how groups may enable themselves to implement strategies that can bring about transformation and possible directions to go in working through the difficulties. Constructing a vision for the group is important. By outlining the steps needed the group can enact this vision. While Stringer deals with large-scale processes, most of what he has to say can be transferred to smaller and culturally diverse groups. The group needs to take the time to look at what sort of vision they want and how they will implement this vision for the good of the whole community.

Stringer, like Mezirow and Cranton, believe that transformative adult thinking will move people out of traditional, systemic thinking to new, more community-oriented and participatory dialogue and healing action. This thinking allows groups to create methodology to formulate "mutually acceptable solutions" to the issues they face.²⁰ And while difficulty arises in finding those "solutions," this model can help bring us closer to solutions that have come out of the struggle and the pain and the diversity surrounding homosexuality.

²⁰ Stringer, 188.

Schrock-Shenk and Ressler, the Bible, and Community Conflict

Conflicts are a part of transformative adult learning. We encounter conflict anytime we reflect on differences that are brought to the discourse around painful and difficult issues. Schrock-Shenk and Ressler's volume, Making Peace with Conflict, offers a biblical story lens into the discussion of conflicting viewpoints in dialogue. Each author in the book takes a story or image of conflict in the Bible and connects it to a concrete situation in which we may find ourselves. This is especially important when dealing with issues of homosexuality since most of the arguments heard use biblical references as support. Ressler states that biblical stories can help us get through our personal anger and pain, and move toward a healing that is transformative. Somehow, biblical stories can reach down to the very depths of our souls and, like all transformative work, alter us at our most basic level so that change is a lasting one.²¹ These stories bring us close to our biblical roots and have a way of building trust around painful issues. By this I mean that most people in the Christian tradition are brought up to believe that the Bible is somehow the "word," or "inspired word," of God. If we look at the stories of relationships and inclusive love that God has shown for creation, people will perhaps look more closely at issues like homosexuality. If we can look at the entire story and not do simple "proof-texting," we might begin to open up and listen if they think the discussion is "biblically based."

Iris de Leon-Hartshorn in her article "Power in Conflict Transformation," addresses systemic power and conflict issues through the stories of the Serpent, The

²¹ Lawrence Ressler, "The Keys to Problem Solving," in Making Peace with Conflict, by Schrock-Shenk and Ressler, 188.

Tower of Babel and Jesus' temptation in the desert.²² Power is attractive, and power dynamics come up time and time again in transformative adult learning. Who has the power, who wants it, who tries to wield it over others and why does that not work in true adult education? Power is seductive and systemic power (our long held assumptions and frames of reference) is even more so because it pervades our culture and our institutions: the very fiber of our social upbringing. This power causes us to internalize what the system teaches us, and we do not understand, unless we look at those assumptions, that it is distorted and may trample other realities. We can oppress others while thinking we are doing good because we only know our reality of power and not that there may be other realities of power different from ours. People become marginalized and powerless because the systemic power becomes the only power in the community. These powers and principalities are to be found in all our social and religious institutions.

We see these powers and principalities when dealing with homosexual issues in our social and religious institutions. We internalize what the system has taught, that homosexuality is against nature and against what God wants for creation. It keeps the 'powers that be' in power so that those who try to speak up are silenced. Those with different ideas of power dynamics are not heard if we do not find ways of lifting up their stories. So we go to the Bible and hear how the oppressed and the poor and the outcast are the beloved of God and that helps balance the power dynamics of the group (after much struggle to be sure).

Some of the ways to deal with these power dynamics are through prayer, education of and accountability to the marginalized or the oppressed. Prayer is

²² Iris de Leon-Hartshorn, "Power in Conflict Transformation," in Making Peace, 131.

nourishment for the journey to be faced. Congregations must educate themselves about the diversity that exists within their own communities. The church must be accountable to the oppressed both within and without their community. This is accomplished in transformative education because this approach is based on hearing the “other stories,” the ones that are not the loudest or those shared by the majority.

Schrock-Shenk opens Making Peace with Conflict with the idea of “connectedness.”²³ We are connected to God and to the communities around us. This is what makes us who we are. Dialogue and the conflict that accompanies it can be an opportunity to connect. To connect means we become intimate with the difference in one another and come to know it deeply. This must happen in transformative thinking, we must know the other person and we must connect with the conflict deeply, and probably painfully, in order to find new and creative ways to bring God’s healing connectedness to all of creation.²⁴ Conflict is a good thing, because it helps us to name what is at the root of our disagreements and deal with them, then let them go as best that we can. By letting them go we can find new creative responses to the difficult issues, which can be constructive to healing. The biblical stories of conflict and resolution through God’s creative and inclusive love can be a useful tool in dialoguing with the painful issues of homosexuality the church faces today. We center ourselves in love and that can ground us and sustain us through the struggles that ensue in transformative learning. We come back to love and prayer when we stray from the creative dialogue. In the theology of

²³ Schrock-Shenk, “Foundations of Conflict Transformation,” in Making Peace, 25.

²⁴ Schrock-Schenk and Ressler, 29.

community, we remember God is power through diversity and that helps us navigate the differences and lift them up for the betterment of creation.

Kegan's Lens

Robert Kegan in "What Form Transforms?" argues that it is how we know that will make more of a difference in our transformation than just what we know. Where we are coming from developmentally is more efficacious than where we are going to in his view of transformative work.²⁵ How we acquire knowledge is going to make a difference in the shape that knowledge takes in the wider community. This means that the teacher or facilitator must understand how the adult learner learns before any adult education can happen. Some pedagogies will not work with certain individuals as they acquire knowledge in a manner different from others. In a group setting, people bring diversity to the table and a set, supposedly ideal table, all ready and prepared may not work.

Kegan proposes that transformative education is a process and may not be, unlike Brookfield's belief, a sudden and epiphanal experience and certainly not a simple change of attitude towards a problem. This is not depth of change. We must risk our basic beliefs and knowledge that we have acquired in order to transform. We must completely rebuild our very foundation that has been our upbringing so that our normal response to difference is deeply new and life changing.²⁶ Kegan's theory of developmental-constructivism is helpful in transformative dialogue around issues of homosexuality.

While I do believe, like Brookfield, we need a very shaking of our foundations, Kegan

²⁵ Robert Kegan, "What 'Form' Transforms? A Constructive-Developmental Approach to Transformative Learning," in Learning as Transformation, by Jack Mezirow and Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 51.

²⁶ Ibid

offers many developmental guideposts to how we may discourse on these issues. Kegan's "shaking" is developmental, more of a process than Brookfield's and more in tune with my model.

First, it is necessary to allow people to talk about how they acquired their knowledge of homosexuality. What were the factors that influenced them? Everyone will be a bit different and that difference needs to be heard. How, then, did they assimilate this knowledge in interaction with community and family life? Were they influenced heavily by what others thought (Cranton)? Did they have an experience that may have frightened them (someone making a pass at them)? Finding out how people know these things is what will get us to deep dialogue. It is most helpful in understanding a community's diversity of opinion on homosexuality and therefore its openness to reflection on their own learning process.

Kegan's emphasis on process and time is key to building a good transformative model. Brookfield states, it takes time to build dialogue, and to reflect upon and understand difference so that change can happen. Process means that we are on a journey and it is the journey, not the end that counts. We may not get to an ending that is totally satisfactory, but we will build relationships and respect through time spent. Everyone's "how-I-got-this-knowledge" frame of reference will be heard if it is understood that development is a process and that construction takes time. Kegan, like Cranton, emphasizes the individual learning process, which in turn can help others to see the diversity that exists and that such diversity is an asset to any dialogue of transformation.

One problem is that process and time do not satisfactorily deal with the “itch” to get the problem solved or with the community’s avoidance of anything painful. People usually give up because the process is too long and too painful. We are taught in this culture to be stress-free and ‘keep it simple’. We lack the grounding to truly struggle with painful issues like homosexuality, especially in the church. We would just as soon take a vote and say “yes” and leave it at that. That is why Schronk-Shenk’s biblical model may work better with truly difficult issues in that we can find that spiritual fountain to refresh ourselves when the going gets really tough. Transformative education is about deep and radical change and that is usually a long and painful process. It is important that we have a way to sustain ourselves in the process and renew our patience throughout the journey.

Transformation and Justice: Belenky, Stanton, and Deloz

Belenky and Stanton discuss the very important issue of the equality of those included in the dialogue of transformational learning.²⁷ They take issue, and rightly so I think, with Mezirow’s ideal model that assumes equality of the participants. Their theory is that relationships are truly asymmetrical.²⁸ Simply, people deal with each other in a diversity of ways because people are different. If we do not recognize this and lift up this difference we fail to empower individuals and we fail to engage justice issues in any depth. We maintain the status quo in power dynamics if we try to equalize everyone and assume that all participants come to the discourse with an equal amount of knowledge,

²⁷ Mary Field Belenky and Ann V. Stanton, “Inequality, Development, and Connected Knowing, in Learning as Transformation, by Jack Mezirow and Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 73.

²⁸ Ibid.

and developmental level, ability, and enthusiasm for justice. We need to include the marginalized and oppressed, as well as the marginalizers and oppressors in the dialogue or there will be no real change in the situation because no difference is affirmed and brought into the process.

We bring justice to the dialogue because we account for and lift up difference. We acknowledge power dynamics and encourage those who feel powerless to speak. We intentionally include difference in this model because it radically challenges the power of the status quo and helps empower the powerless. Belenky and Stanton's model demands the participation of all, but that demand is more of a gentle prodding. Demanding means creating a just atmosphere for dialogue, that is one where all will be heard and know what they say will be valued. This demand alone, of course, would put people off since they would see it as some sort of power play by the status quo to merely look good in the dialogue. People must understand that they will not be ridiculed for their beliefs as this kind of justice model creates a safe and loving environment of inclusivity to those who wish to participate.

Another important facet of Belenky and Stanton's argument is that it allows the individual and group to wrestle with the dualistic thinking that pervades most hot topic issues. People feel there are only two sides to any argument, pro and con. One can see it in the talk shows of today that are on television, in the books written on hot topic issues and in political debates. There are no gray areas, because those challenge us too much. But in transformative learning we need to be challenged, we cannot think in either/or terms because issues and people (as we have seen in Cranton and others) are much more

complex and layered. If we understand that issues are complex then the polarized structure of traditional dialogue begins to crumble. The justice of difference breaks down the hierarchical structure of power in the either/or model. The power structure is hierarchical because the dialogue is polarized, that is one side is the right side, the majority, and the other is wrong side, or the minority. The right side wins out, but justice is defeated because those who are marginalized and different remain so unless they come over to the right side with everyone else. Belenky and Stanton's model works against that and that contributes positively to my own model.

While there seems to be a dialogue about homosexuality for example, those who agree and those who do not, there is in fact a "right" way. The right way is the majority who have the power, the wrong way are the "others" who try to stand against the power but are silenced by the majority that does not recognize difference as valuable, even essential part of creation. We are not all the same and are not intended to be. Our society wants homogeneity because we feel that being united strengthens us. Of course it does in a way, but it washes over difference, making it look calm and united on the surface while trouble lurks beneath. If we all think the same on the surface, to put on a good face and show our solidarity with justice, we ignore the complexity below, the differences we all have, as intended of creation. People resent being left out of the dialogue because they have trouble agreeing with all aspects of a certain issue. If the group rides roughshod over them, they will feel alone, alienated and resentful. Group denial of difference only adds to the feelings of discontent and the stagnation of creation.

Another helpful aspect of Belenky and Stanton's take on transformative education is that they envision a model that allows sharing of experiences.²⁹ People are allowed to see each other's frames of reference, how other people approach the problem and talk about it in ways that can be both captivating (as in storytelling) and thought provoking. Stories can touch us deeply and perhaps deeply enough to open us to critical reflection. To be able to hear the other person's story is essential in understanding each other and creating a better model for transformative learning. It will empower the powerless, the voiceless, the marginalized and the oppressed and lift up the diversity that exists in the tension of polarities that dominate the dialogical landscape concerning homosexuality.

Laurent Daloz looks at how we deal with the "otherness" in dialogue.³⁰ Citing Nelson Mandela's experience in prison, Daloz presents us with an approach to transformative education that must involve the presence of difference, or the "other." There is within this community of difference an earnest and loving dialogue that seeks to better the community and the welfare of all. While this may be easier with those who know us, Daloz claims it is more transforming with those different from us. This is different from Cranton's "like-minded" group, though she does not mean that everyone agrees with everything the group discusses. The presence of difference is in Cranton's model, but perhaps not the radical "other" of Daloz. His model contains four parts which

²⁹ Belenky and Stanton, 75.

³⁰ Laurent A. Parks Daloz, "Transformative Learning for the Common Good," in Learning as Transformation by Jack Mezirow and Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 110.

all must take place within a community that is committed in their difference to the common good of creation and the community.³¹

It is important to Daloz that in the discourse of transformative adult learning, diversity is affirmed. Since nature and evolution demand diversity, it makes sense that diversity is to be lifted up wherever it is encountered. That diversity must be engaged deeply and honestly in critical reflection. Each participant should feel a part of, and valued in, the dialogue. If diversity is one of the bases for dialogue then people will feel that they can indeed participate in the discourse, as difficult as it might be. We lift up the diversity and engage that difference equally and lovingly, allowing each to feel a part of the process. If they are not heard, then the community may be in danger of stagnation, as those who differ will simply leave or stop participating in the progress of the community. If one does not feel affirmed, gay or straight, the community cannot move forward.

Daloz agrees with Kegan, Cranton, Brookfield and Mezirow in believing that there must be a deep questioning of one's fundamental approaches to learning. Life is not always how we think is it or should be.³² We need deep, thoughtful and difficult dialogue with each other about our assumptions in order for transformation to occur. This sort of discourse leads to a better understanding of our core ideals and principles and those of others. This helps us connect on deeper levels of commonality that helps us see ourselves as connected to something larger, the importance of the common good. There is much pain connected with homosexuality and we can connect with each other in that pain. The pain may be different (of course, which is good) but we all experience pain

³¹ Ibid., 112

³² Ibid., 113.

and need help in moving through it. A community that connects with that can help each other and understand each other. This can bring people together in respect if not agreement and open them up to the importance of the other in dialogue.

This community of help is a kind of teaching community for Daloz.³³

Colleagues, friends, teachers and others can help us critically reflect in an empowering way on that which has long been held the “right” kind of thinking. This would be with a community that values the basics of transformative learning.³⁴ The difficulty with Daloz’s argument here, though, is that certainly not every community is in this position. The church, in particular, can be a place where this sort of thinking is not fostered in any way. Sometimes before we even get to this place, the community needs to dialogue about what it means to be diverse (part of the preparation in my model). We want this community to exist, but like some of Mezirow’s theory, it is an ideal and may not work in diverse contexts with diverse participants. While it is wonderful to be in a community that supports diversity and discourse, they seem few and far between outside the academic world. Most church communities discussing issues surrounding homosexuality (if they are discussing it at all) are not supportive of difference as well. Thus, the facilitator has much more preliminary work to do in that instance. Dialogue might not even be possible within that context, but then this is what transformative learning seeks to get at, this resistance to difference.

Finally Daloz speaks to praxis. He believes, with Stringer, that once the first three parts are dealt with we must move to action that has come out of thoughtful,

³³ Ibid., 115.

³⁴ Ibid., 116.

difficult and critical reflection resulting from the previous parts of the model.³⁵ This is the final step in the process. For Daloz the common good cannot be accomplished in the classroom but must move to where the rubber meets the road. This can occur both outside the community as well as inside the community. After we have struggled with the issues and now we are able to work on a model that will let us create something new and see if it indeed works in the “real” world. After finding way to move once having taking a justice stand on homosexuality, the church can get past this “event.” Through our transformative discourse we have found a way to move ahead and affirm homosexuals in the church. We have created a vision and we know that we must all be committed to that vision with all our differences. We know we are diverse and not in complete agreement on all aspects of the issue but we have acknowledged that and connected with each other. We have become grounded as a community only after we have struggled with these issues. We have not glossed over anything, nor have we intentionally left difference out because of the pain it caused others or ourselves. We have supported and loved each other in that dialogue which has unified us in our diversity so that we can have strength for the further journey that awaits us.

Conclusion: Unity in Diversity

So, how does all this come together in a way that best compliments this project? Well, there is unity in diversity: all of the scholars discussed in this chapter are connected in their varying approaches to transformative education. Mezirow is the founder of

³⁵ Ibid.

transformative education. The belief that we must question deeply our assumptions and our frames of reference serves as the cornerstone for all the other theories discussed here. All the authors, including myself, believe that we must create a way to encounter difference so that we change radically how we view the world and our relationship to it. We cannot remain the same, at the deepest levels, if we truly engage in transformative adult learning.

With that said, we need to see how the branches grow from the root, yet are different. Some scholars take issue with Mezirow's ideal seminar approach. Scholars like Cranton, Daloz, Belenky and Stanton see that as unrealistic in the world. Difference is the way of the world, diversity is its underpinning and an ideal approach simply does not work in a world of varying contexts. So while we have the foundation of Mezirow, we must find connections with difference that allow for diversity, for the "other," as Daloz puts it.

I can use all of these authors in some way to form my own model. Just as they connect with some but not all aspects of each other, so can I. We all want to see the marginalized and powerless brought into the conversation. Daloz, Stanton and Belenky offer ways of doing that. We affirm difference; we deliberately include it in the dialogue and find ways to connect with that difference. In issues of homosexuality this is essential, because there is so much difference to be encountered. Allowing for all stories to be told, people in different places in their learning and openness to difference connects all these theories. If we are connected spiritually through biblical stories and faith, we can look at difference as being in the image of God and therefore a deeper connection that allows us to sustain ourselves through the struggles of transformative work.

Kegan and Brookfield stress the importance of process and time, but also the fact that we must truly change at a deep, deep level. Brookfield in particular insists that it is not transformative if that change is not at the very foundation of our being. We must allow for this change, though in a way that comes out of our community context. This sort of change is painful and unpleasant and so Kegan's emphasis on process and time are important. To understand that change will take time and that the struggle is a process can help people sustain themselves when the going becomes almost unbearable. And Iris de Hartshorn's prayerful centering becomes important too, as that takes us to our deep and calming center where God is and gives us nourishment for our journey.

We must also look at our psychological dispositions, as Cranton suggests. To understand and react to difference and take it into us to either accept or reject leads us to a connection with each other that acknowledges our difference. We come to create a table and we do this through lenses that are of different corrections (like the glasses we wear). Some corrections are stronger and some weaker and they all play a part in how we, as individuals, see the world. Still it is all part of the diversity that must be lifted up if transformative learning is to happen. We are different and Cranton acknowledges that and supports it in a way that connects each of us, through our different and complex psychological predisposition.

All of these models are for justice and healing. All of these models connect with the theology of community discussed in chapter one. We are made in the image of God therefore diversity is important to us. Creation is diverse in order to survive and become the best that it can be, a never-ending process. We therefore must be that way, if that is true and we claim to be spiritual and religious people. We must connect with creation in

all its diversity and we must connect with each other in all our diversity. The diversity of theories in this chapter connect on the basic level that we must work toward the common good in transformative education and that means encountering difference and affirming that difference. It means changing at the very core of our being, by listening, reflecting and struggling in pain and frustration with those who are not part of our frame of reference.

I believe that each one of these authors contributes and connects with my model for encountering and dialoguing with the difficult issues of homosexuality. We are complex, as are the issues. Our connection takes place only when we move below the surface of that seemingly homogenous ocean of the status quo and struggle with the turbulent currents that are the true life of that ocean. No one agrees with all the parts integral to the issue of homosexuality. Even those people, who have taken a stand for justice, find certain aspects of homosexuality difficult and uncomfortable. They are on points of the spectrum, there is diversity that needs to be dialogued which lies beneath the rainbow flag of unity and that can be reached in the arena of transformative adult learning.³⁶

Transformative adult learning, therefore, is the best theory for achieving a deep and honest dialogue surrounding the issues of homosexuality. It lifts up diversity and the common good of the community. It affirms the oppressed and the marginalized wherever they are located. It allows people to hear each other's stories and connect on a level that

³⁶ The Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgendered and Transsexual community adopted the Rainbow Flag. This flag symbolizes the celebration and affirmation of diversity and their acceptance in the community. Churches that fly this flag are those that, at least on the surface, support and affirm lesbians and gays and welcome them with full status into their communities.

will help them acknowledge their differences and work for the radical change necessary to move the community forward toward the creative love and inclusive community that is at the center of all creation. It allows even a so-called liberal community, such as the church where I have served, to look at their own diversity and find a way to move past the “vote” and into the dialogue of change.

CHAPTER 4

The Situation

The church today is embroiled in a controversy that appears to have the church headed for schism. Homosexuality is the hot topic in most mainline churches. At the time of the writing of this project there is a controversy raging in the Episcopal Church over the appointment of an openly gay bishop. The more conservative members and bishops are threatening to split off from the Anglican Communion and the American Episcopal Church. There seem to be only two sides to the issue: for or against the ordination. This is one of the major problems preventing any real dialogue on this issue, the fact that everyone believes there are only two sides.

In television, radio, movies, newspapers and even scholarly books, people have taken up the issue as a two-sided problem. But is it really? In this chapter I will look at some of the so-called dialogue that is happening in the church as well as the research results in my own congregation. I hope to show that there are not simply two sides to this issue. People have diverse feelings about homosexuality even if they may have “signed on” to a justice statement supporting homosexuals in the church. I will take a look at the literature that is being written about the dialogue taking place now in churches as well as what is happening in my own denomination and the church where my research has taken place.

Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate edited by Jeffrey Siker sums up the situation in the church at this time. The title puts the dialogue on two sides and uses the word “debate,” which brings to mind pro and con with little gray area. Everyone assumes there are only two positions: either you are for affirmation of

homosexuality in the church community or against it. The literature being published that contains articles and essays concerning this difficult issue contain material that pit conservative against liberal, and progressive Christian against fundamentalist Christian. Everyone states their point and no one seems to be grappling with the diversity that exists even within those “unified” positions.

There is also very little dialogue about the diversity of positions in the liberal church. My biggest surprise in the research for this paper was the Open and Affirming congregation where I did the research.¹ Through anonymous questionnaires I discovered that even within this liberal congregation, not everyone agreed with all the issues. This will be discussed later in the paper, however. First it is important to look at the models for dialogue currently in use and how they lack the ability to lift up the diversity that exists by simply constructing such models in a two-sided debate format. It is evident that people exist on a spectrum rather than either end. What is important is the tension that exists in the area between the pro and the con, where people wrestle with their multiplicity of feelings concerning homosexuality and the church.

You’re Either for or Against

While Siker points out in his introduction that his intent is include people on all sides of the issue, the dialogue (as Siker himself admits) follows the traditional form of

¹ It will be helpful for the reader to know that Open and Affirming churches are those in the United Church of Christ denomination that have affirmed the right for homosexuals to be full participants in the congregation, as well as the right to be ordained, and have a Holy union blessed by the church. This action is taken after a long and usually painful process outlined in a workbook and video showing how some churches have dealt with the issue of becoming open and affirming. Then a vote is taken as to whether the congregation wishes to take this justice stand. The problem is what happens after this vote is taken and how the process and dialogue continue so that people are truly affirmed in the church. I am attempting to create a model that does this.

the quadrilateral: scripture, tradition, reason, experience.² It works but does not cover the diversity within all those categories. Still, people end up on essentially one side or the other. For example, Siker includes a letter written by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith of the Roman Catholic Church. In this letter, Ratzinger sets out the Catholic Church's position on homosexuality. He uses both scripture and church tradition for declaring homosexuality against the will of God and the church. However, while saying this he also deplores the use of violence and hatred against homosexuals, a traditional 'love the sinner hate the sin' approach.³ However, he does show compassion and reasonableness in his approach, which I think demonstrates a diversity that needs to be lifted up. Even a conservative theologian such as Ratzinger has to struggle with the idea that homosexuals are to be treated as human beings. Still, the letter is on one side, that of those against affirmation of homosexuality as a gifted part of creation.

The essays in Siker's book, while reasoned and well thought out, still people tend to put someone either at one end of the spectrum or the other. However, Jack Roger's essay does point out the need for diversity and for creating a way in which those in between the left and the right can participate.⁴ While setting out the traditional framework of scripture, etc. that is followed throughout the book he does point to the

² Siker, xv.

³ Joseph Ratzinger, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons" (1986), in Homosexuality in the Church, ed. Jeffrey S. Siker, 43.

⁴ Jack Rogers, "Sex, Philosophy, and Politics: How and What the Church Must Decide in the Debate over Ordination of Homosexuals," in Homosexuality in the Church, ed. Jeffrey S. Siker, 161.

need for participation from the community. It is important to Rogers that the full spectrum of opinion about ordination is heard. He places the dialogue within a spiritually committed framework where all affirm their ultimate commitment to God. Everyone must acknowledge they are part of the same church, even if diversity is to be celebrated.⁵ He points out the need for both sides to understand the importance of scriptural debate and what is said and not said in the Bible. Homosexuality is condemned in certain scriptural passages Rogers points out (and I agree) but we need too to look at them closely. Scriptural authority is important to Rogers, but so is the need for all to dialogue fairly and lovingly and deeply about what is actually written. This is Roger's call to diversity in unity, staying centered with Scriptural authority while looking at the whole picture relationally. People are not going to agree with all Scriptural issues simply because one side or the other says it is right or wrong. People along the spectrum need to discuss how they approach the issue and that tends to be more experiential and relational.

Rogers believes that simply forcing a vote (in his case the Presbyterian Church USA) will not decide the issue. This is exactly what is happening within the United Church of Christ today. People vote on the issue without discussion of the diversity of opinions that exist between the poles of yes or no. It is essential to Rogers that both sides must be in dialogue with those in the spectrum that exists between the sides in order for transformation to occur and honest and deep dialogue to be a part of the decision making. This is obviously true within the context of the church where my research occurred. Several people still have a multiplicity of feelings and thoughts about all issues

⁵ Ibid, 165.

surrounding homosexuality and the church. Like Rogers points out, these people must be included in the dialogue if they are to move to a position that is centered in the spirit of Christ and inclusive of all.

Richard B. Hays, in his essay, “Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies,” states clearly that the church cannot condone homosexual behavior.⁶ But again, while seemingly on one side of the issue he demonstrates his own struggle, I think, by pointing out we should not exclude homosexuals from the church (though he does believe homosexuals need to repent of the behavior, like alcoholics), and that it may not be possible for homosexuals to change their behavior (as some, he says, believe). He also opposes same sex unions and ordination for homosexuals, yet maintains that we all live in sin and no one can be judging another. Yet, he judges homosexuals by saying they need repentance and renewal, while excluding relationships that may be committed and loving and just as real and true as heterosexual ones. He tries to reconcile his deeply rooted views of homosexuality with the reality of real people and real relationships. Encountering each other brings to the surface a diversity of feelings concerning the subject, where we see the struggle to love and judge at the same time. One must note that Hay’s view is based on his friend who repented of his “homosexuality.” I do not believe repentance is a part of the compassionate understanding of a person who is homosexual.

The UCC congregation dealt with in this paper also struggled with these issues. Things we said like, “I have these certain feelings about homosexuality that I was taught and yet I am encountering homosexuals in my church who are loving and committed

⁶ Richard B. Hays, “Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies: The Witness of Scripture Concerning Homosexuality,” in Homosexuality in the Church, ed. Jeffrey S. Siker, 13.

Christians and human beings. How do I reconcile those feelings?” Hays does not have the answer because the his discussion really never addresses his struggles in coming to terms with what tradition says about homosexual behavior and how that informs committed relationships that happen between two people. These feelings come up again and again in all the essays in the literature read. No one is completely on one side or the other, in spite of the structure of the books or the titles. Still, the spectrum was not represented. Rogers wants the whole spectrum to be a part of the discussion, as does Hays, while struggling with their own “spectrum” of feelings. They are really caught in the tension between the poles, where the discussion needs to happen.

In Homosexuality and Christian Community, we find a series of essays written in response to the statement by members of the Princeton Theological Seminary community.⁷ The Document is entitled “A Princeton Declaration: Upholding the PC (USA) in the Decision Not to Ordain Individuals Engaged in Homosexual Practice.”⁸ This is only one issue surrounding homosexuality and the church, but it points to the diversity of opinion that exists under one issue. Again, however, though thoughtful and compassionate, the essays take up the two-sided dialogue model, excluding (on the surface at least) those outside the academic and ecclesiastical world. The positive thrust of this book is that we see the struggle that these scholars go through while maintaining their right/wrong position. We can see that tension between relationship and biblical

⁷ Choon-Leong Seow, ed. Homosexuality and Christian Community (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

⁸ Ibid., ix.

authority that is between the homosexuals we relate to in our communities and the tradition of a church that excludes them.

Congregations in Conflict: The Battle Over Homosexuality provides an interesting look at various congregations and how they dealt with homosexuality in their own communities.⁹ In the struggle that Pullen Baptist Church experienced for example, we see how a conservative church dealt head on with the idea of same sex unions. They met and discussed for several weeks where at least one person at each meeting “came out.”¹⁰ Many people who had been adamantly opposed to homosexuality changed their stances concerning the issue while still struggling with their own diverse and complex feelings. Relationships transformed their thinking. Being in dialogue together with difference and truly struggling with the issues helped this church look at their long held assumptions and critically reflect.

With Pullen, people struggled with difference. They looked long and hard at how they viewed homosexuality. They had dialogue where people’s stories were told, where people they knew and loved shared their struggles. This was a book that had many positive and hopeful moments for transformative work. Diversity was lifted up and connections were made where there had seemingly been none before. People actually got

⁹ Keith Hartman, Congregations in Conflict: The Battle Over Homosexuality (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996).

¹⁰ Coming out is a process where a homosexual person reveals his orientation to those around him and then struggles with the consequences of that action. Coming out may happen over a period of many years, as it did with me, or may happen quickly. However it happens, it is a process of becoming part of society and recognizing who one is in relation to society.

to know each other better and struggled with each other to transform their way of thinking.

There were many positive endings to these various stories. Still, whatever the outcome, because difference and diversity were recognized and celebrated, healing took place. No congregation was in the same place after the dialogue had occurred. People, who normally did not say anything, felt in each case that they could come forward and be heard. Especially when they knew someone who was a homosexual in their congregation, they felt the need to come forward. Having a relationship with someone who was homosexual was important in voicing opinion. The atmosphere surrounding all these events, though charged, was compassionate and honest and allowed people to reflect on the issue rather than just react to it. It is useful to know these things in this project, as many voices in the UCC church researched had not been heard. Looking at how both liberal and conservative churches responded in their communities to the issues surrounding homosexuality can help this UCC congregation. They can see the necessity for difference and how it must be heard in order to transform their thinking and move toward reconciliation. No firm solution need be reached if the journey itself is healing.

Hartman's book is contributive to the model this paper seeks to create. It contains real people struggling painfully with issues surrounding homosexuality. It demonstrates that diversity, though difficult and frustrating, is important in the healing process. Everyone shares their differences while not everyone agrees with all the complexities that make up the larger issue of homosexuality. The struggle is fully engaged by all people participating as much as possible. Connections were made because people were with each other in relationship. They knew each other and sat with each other at the table they

created. Being present with each other, even in pain, gives hope that a model can work that will engage difference and diversity even when everyone agrees in principal with an issue.

In The Loyal Opposition, Tex Sample and Amy E. DeLong have included stories of people standing up while staying in the community. The question they ask is how one can remain faithful to God and experience what one author calls “ecclesiastical disobedience?”¹¹ In other words, how does a United Methodist disobey the church’s stance on homosexuality and remain faithful? In this essay and others we see examples of people using their faith and spirituality to stand against the legalities of the Methodist Social Principles when these legalities go against the love and compassion of God. Joretta L. Marshall says using this method, a lot like civil disobedience in the secular world, can bring us closer to God through the time honored process of spiritual discipline. Spiritual discipline is a path to God that is achieved by a series of exercises: prayer, meditation, singing, walking, silence and other repetitive procedures. These methods, like practicing a musical instrument or working out physically at the gym or learning to eat healthily, help to deepen one’s understanding of what God wants for the situation and give one the strength to carry out that want.

The stories used in Sample and DeLong’s book, from biblical analysis to sermons, demonstrate how to use faith and tradition to overcome those who do not affirm homosexuality in the United Methodist Church. Yet this may be used in any church, as most people within congregations do not want to leave the congregation over issues like

¹¹ Joretta L. Marshall, “Ecclesiastical Disobedience as a Spiritual Discipline,” in The Loyal Opposition, ed. Tex Sample and Amy DeLong (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 160.

this, but would rather work within the system. This book demonstrates that not all United Methodist agree with their church's stance on homosexuality. It is the same within the UCC. But it is important to see how churches deal individually with these issues and stay in the community. This book lifts up diversity and proclaims it as necessary in church communities in order to struggle with issues like this. Examples of this diversity will be seen later in this chapter. This is a good model to use as the book contains real situations with real people dealing with their desire to bring the church to where they feel it acquires a more just and inclusive stance on homosexuality. How these stories deal with their diverse feelings about the church and homosexuality offer good incite into how a liberal church, supposedly under one rainbow umbrella of affirmation of homosexuality, can look at their own diversity and be able to dialogue. There are doubts about certain issues surrounding homosexuality in the UCC church that is researched in this paper. Those doubts need to be talked about, just as the United Methodists who disagree with the Methodist church about homosexuality need to bring their feelings to the surface to help change the situation as best it can.

These churches keep God at the center of the dialogue. With spiritual discipline and grounding these people made their voices heard. People listened more closely because of the Christ-centered approach and it kept the dialogue compassionate within the tension. This is a good map for this project's model. Keeping dialogue prayerful and spiritually centered is especially helpful as it can help people keep love in the picture, particularly when the discussion gets heated, which it does. Keeping prayer and God at the center can keep the dialogue on track and the openness strong in the midst of the

struggle over the issues. Relationships, faithfulness and spiritual discipline are essentials in transformative learning within any congregation.

Another author that must be included is Beth Ann Gaede because her model informs this project well.¹² The book is divided into three parts that deal with preparation, dialogue and action and reflection. We see the struggle through the eyes of many different congregations. Gaede and the other authors present how various churches handled the issue of affirming homosexuality. In each instance the churches prepared themselves for the talk, then engaged in dialogue and took action. Finally reflections are offered about what worked and what did not.

In the first part the scene is set when Sylvia Thorson-Smith writes about the difficulty in talking about the history of sexuality and spirituality in the church.¹³ This part of the model discusses the church's attitude towards these issues and why they may be so difficult to discuss today. The church has been notoriously silent on these issues except to speak in dualistic terms of flesh and spirit. Sex has become, therefore, a shameful thing because of the teaching that things of the flesh are not of God, but only those of the spirit. We are to be holy as God is holy and that involves staying away from earthly things, like sex—except for procreation. Just being a part of this initial discussion can prove fruitful because people might begin to understand why they have the feelings they do towards sexuality and the church.

¹² Beth Ann Gaede, ed., Congregations Talking about Homosexuality (Bethesda, Md.: Alban Institute Publication, 1998).

¹³ Sylvia Thorson-Smith, "Talking about Sexuality," in Congregations Talking about Homosexuality (Alban Institute Publication, 1998), 3.

If we understand why we have such difficulties with sexuality and spirituality then we can look at why we have such difficulty with homosexuality. If we understand why the church shuns discussion we may see, as with the alcoholic in the family, why the problem will only get worse and not better. Conversation needs to take place and the part of the groundwork to be laid is an understanding of our attitudes towards sexuality and the Holy. Is sexuality a gift? Is it a gift simply for procreation, or for enjoyment, as part of the relationship between two people? What is public and what is private when it comes to discussion? What do men talk about and women, and what should they talk about together?¹⁴ These questions that Smith looks at help us to understand the hurdles we need to overcome before we even talk about homosexuality.

The first section continues discussing the difficulties of talking about homosexuality. With incendiary issues like homosexuality in the church, these next few essays look at the need for care in dialogue and set out ground rules that are part of this care. Here we see the need, as in the model constructed in this paper, for trust to be built and safety to be assured. These two make up the cornerstone for any model addressing difficult issues like homosexuality. If we do not have these, very few people, if any, will want to engage deep issues, since they will not feel safe enough to trust others so they can share what they have to say without being judged. These also allow for the diversity that exists within the community to be brought out and looked at with an openness that may encourage transformative learning. Whatever table is created with trust and safety, will be a stronger, more lasting table.

¹⁴ Ibid., 6.

Gaede's book then moves to the praxis for which the first section has prepared us. Here, seven churches from varying denominations are profiled in their grappling with the difficult issues of homosexuality in all its forms. There is no one model used for all churches, but a diversity of models each in keeping with the needs and problems of that community. This is just as it should be since each church has many different people that make it a unique congregation. They all allow congregational meetings where everyone can be heard and the problem can be brought to the public forum. Nothing is usually solved in the congregational meetings, but here the congregation sets up smaller discussions surrounding the issues where the struggle is engaged. They all set ground rules, which are based on love and tolerance and Christ centered.¹⁵ And while the success of each process is varied (meaning some churches did not commit themselves to being open and affirming), all of them had some transformative moments that brought new knowledge and new appreciation of each other and the issue.

Seeing other churches struggle with this issue is helpful for this project because most all of the issues and questions and difficulties raised are similar to the UCC church where this research took place. Many of the questions about the various sides of homosexuality, like ordination, same-sex unions, children, adoption, and biblical references, are addressed. These are the same questions addressed in the liberal UCC

¹⁵ It is probably appropriate that I explain what I mean by Christ-centered. I believe that Christians feel the spirit of Christ is alive in the church today and is primarily the spirit of love and compassion. This is what Jesus demonstrated during his life and if he was somehow the incarnation of God then we are expected to live that expectation as a church.

We keep Christ at the center and we are more likely, I feel, to have open and loving dialogue and the patience and faith to see it through. We are more likely to set loving boundaries for these difficult issues and, as Jesus did, reach out to all who are different and celebrate that difference as part of God's joyous creation.

church. Seeing the connections can help a liberal church understand that they are not above the fray and that diversity does indeed exist under their banner of justice and affirmation. Talking about it and struggling as these churches in this book did can certainly witness to everyone the need for difference to be celebrated. It is only when that happens that transformation begins, I think. It is a painful process, but simply put, if they can do it, so can we.

Finally in Gaede's book there is a section where reflection on the processes is presented. What worked and what did not? How constructive was the dialogue? Was it helpful or schismatic?¹⁶ Donald Bossart offers a reflective look at the various processes the churches engaged in and what was fruitful. Conflict can be helpful, but if it is not carefully processed one can merely end up splitting a congregation and stopping the dialogue in its tracks. So it is important to really understand the community before imposing any grand scheme that is not of the community. Dialogue must center on the context of the group and what the group considers to be important. Then one must look at the diversity within the group and the sensitivities that exist before moving to a model to discuss. If there is not careful examination of diversity of the group and the questions the group is asking, or struggles they are dealing with, then an imposed model will probably fail. People do not want to have something imposed on them from the outside. If it comes from within then more are likely to participate and more transformation may take place.

¹⁶ Donald Bossart, "Constructive Conflict or Harmonious Dishonesty," in Congregations Talking about Homosexuality, ed. Beth Ann Gaede (Bethesda, Md.: Alban Institute Publication, 1998), 103.

My project, as with the model that Gaede shares with us, sets out parameters to deal with conflict and dialogue in a healthy way. Diversity is important in understanding what conflict is occurring and how people feel they need to deal with it. Each approach is different. As with a difficult issue like homosexuality, people have different reactions and different ways of dealing with it. In this model, we are offered some tools for the guidelines and then shown ways to get to the differences that exist without exclusion. No one-way is imposed on anyone, but the way comes out of the struggle and dialogue unique to each congregation. That is why this model offers this project so much. Theory, practice and reflection are the necessary components of true transformative education and can offer congregations, even liberal ones as the UCC researched here, a way to deal effectively with the difference that exists, even under the rainbow flag.

Connecting Struggles with a Compassionate Conservative

One of the most interesting essays for me, because I struggled with it the most, was by Max Stackhouse, called “The Heterosexual Norm.”¹⁷ I will look at this essay closely because it best represents a diversity of feelings and thoughts under an umbrella of unity. Stackhouse is a scholar who believes that homosexuality is not a biblically sanctioned relationship, while exhibiting varying feelings concerning persons who are homosexuals. That is, he has a theory based on the Bible, yet when it comes to actual human relationships he seems conflicted.

Stackhouse espouses that male and female is the “normal” relationship set out by the Genesis story and God’s command to Abraham to be fruitful and multiply. He speaks about the need for loving and compassionate dialogue and the need to set boundaries of

¹⁷ Stackhouse, “Heterosexual Norm,” 133.

criticism. Those boundaries mean that there is no name calling from any participants and openness and listening so that all can be heard. Stackhouse believes that hatred toward homosexuals is wrong. He speaks for the need to discuss in an “open and honest way” the frames of reference that the participants use.¹⁸ He disagrees with people who resort to name calling (whether gay or straight) and refuse to listen to thoughtful and reasoned arguments. He believes that all persons should be respected and protected by the law from any form of hate crime or bigotry. He leaves no doubt that there is no excuse for such behavior in the difficult dialogue about homosexuality. We have common ground here and that is a good thing. Here, as in the other essays, are connections that can be used as starting points for transformative dialogue.

Yet, Stackhouse pronounces homosexuality as “terminal sexual behavior” and that the “ethical norm” is heterosexuality.¹⁹ Homosexuals, while to be loved and respected, are fallen creatures in need of guidance (implicit) and repentance so that they may live the biblically sanctioned relational norm that is blessed by God. What is this? How can a person be loving and condemning at the same time? By being human, I think. Like the members of the UCC congregation who struggled with feelings about various aspects of homosexuality, Stackhouse and others struggle with theirs. Not many individuals have singular emotions, thoughts and theories about homosexuality, or any issue for that matter. We are diverse and that is our basis for connecting with each other. It is a way to foster true transformative community.

¹⁸ Ibid., 133.

¹⁹ Ibid., 137.

If liberal members of my church could look at this article (several times, as I had to in order to hear it), then they might be able to see the struggle and pain that affects all of those who take on this issue. The confusion and the seeming back and forth statements that Stackhouse writes, demonstrate that we cannot judge by the surface of individuals. We need to listen to the whole story, many times if necessary, to hear our common pain and to know that we all, like Jacob, must wrestle with the angel.

My personal struggle with Stackhouse helped me to hear him better, while not agreeing with his primary thesis that the Genesis story of male and female is the normative sexual behavior. On personal reflection, I felt angry and hurt on my first reading. I felt beaten up and genuinely discouraged. I asked how will we ever have any fruitful dialogue when people think like this, not seeing that I was being as closed to what he was saying as he was to my thoughts. On my first reading I quit about a third of the way through. I heard nothing because all I saw was the surface, the flag he was waving and not what was beneath the surface, his own inner diversity and struggle.

On my second reading I decided to look at exactly where I agreed and disagreed. Where did we connect? I was surprised by my response. I found many things in common and I saw a compassion I had not seen. I saw that he too had difficulties in hearing the dialogue because of the angry name calling that surrounds the current discussion. He felt cut off from the dialogue and excluded, just the same as I. Name-calling was wrong, which is the way people on all points of the spectrum feel. He points to the need for deep, scholarly dialogue that is thoughtful and reasoned. Stackhouse has a feeling of helplessness in creating any kind of real dialogue, which is a connection among all participants in this hard, painful discussion. This connection was made on

only the first page of the essay. What a difference is made when one listens and is open to commonalities in dialogue.

Stackhouse, like many scholars who disagree that homosexuality is a blessed (my word) behavior, are not homophobic.²⁰ His writing does not indicate that he hates or ridicules homosexuals at all. He is thoughtful, if not loving, in the writing while maintaining a grounded, scholarly argument. He believes in the dignity of each person and the fact that all persons are created in the image of God. He is conflicted in his feelings. He wants to remain compassionate and reasoned, yet he excludes homosexuals from creation. He has very diverse feelings inside, just like those in the UCC church and even myself. After talking about the dignity of all human beings, he continues with a sort of natural theology stating that unless sex is for procreation, it is terminal. This would be a place for dialogue. Connections have been made with the similar struggles engaged and compassion raised but there is disagreement with the idea that homosexuals' sexual behavior is terminal. Just as Stackhouse seems to be exhibiting a nuanced position, it connects with the nuanced positions of the UCC congregation and even my own. We all struggle with maintaining compassion and inclusion in deeply difficult issues like homosexuality. It is personal to all participants. But that, too, is a connection, and perhaps a place to begin dialogue. Today, for example, the argument can be made that since we live in a dangerously overpopulated world, the idea of procreation being the primary reason for sex is weakened. Why procreate when the earth cannot support those people already on the planet? Is then the argument that homosexuality is not normative a solid one? Are there not other factors like starvation, disease, poverty, homelessness, and

²⁰ Homophobia is a word that means fear of homosexuals.

economics that are a part of the argument? Is not a loving relationship more important than having children? Perhaps that is a place to start dialogue with both Stackhouse and those who defend the so-called Biblical imperative of 'be fruitful and multiply'. Perhaps then the argument could move into the more fruitful realm of talking about relationships as opposed to sex. But is it only seeing the diversity in an argument like Stackhouse's and others that we can see a possibility for this kind of dialogue. Diversity is important.

Speaking of Diversity: Surprise under the Rainbow Flag

Diversity is important and the fact that so much was found under the rainbow flag of the UCC church where research was conducted was a surprise. One would expect, as one does with perhaps conservative Christians, everyone to be in agreement with everyone else. After all, the vote was taken and the justice statement of Open and Affirming made. It is an intentional statement of justice and tells people that this church accepts gay, lesbians, bisexual, transgendered and transsexual individuals into the church as full partners in Christ. This section looks at the surprises that were found in a research questionnaire within a church that has already voted to accept homosexuals as full partners in their congregation. In fact, this church has been a justice-oriented congregation for most of its forty years of existence and an Open and Affirming congregation for about seven.

What I found was that, of the eight questionnaires returned out of the small congregation of about forty active members, there was a diversity that I did not expect. Each person who responded could be placed in a different spot along the spectrum, which I discussed earlier. Not everyone agreed with every issue surrounding homosexuality. This section will cover the questions asked and the responses given with reflections about

how this contributes to the model presented in the next chapter. This research caused me to refocus this paper to a liberal church, which had already taken a justice stand affirming homosexuality. This part of the chapter will be a bit more personal as it affects the way the model will be structured and how my role as researcher and facilitator may affect that model.

The Context Situation: A Liberal UCC Church

I have been an Associate Licensed Minister at a UCC church in Orange County, California for the past four years.²¹ I have grown to know this very small family as people who are both inclusive and justice-oriented. They are people who accept others for who they are regardless of race, theological stance, gender or sexual preference. In many conversations people have shown their compassion for difference and have supported my ministry as an “out” gay pastor.²² I have been supported in my growth as a minister and the congregation has demonstrated time and time again that I have a ministry in the church.

I wanted, in this questionnaire, to see where the church wanted to go now that had been “Open and Affirming” for some seven years. They have been looking for a vision in their inclusive community that not only supports homosexuals but also truly affirms

²¹ A licensed minister in the UCC is one who is not yet ordained but may be specially licensed in one church to carry out all pastoral duties. The person must be licensed by an association committee and that license is renewed every year on recommendation by the church council. The person may perform all rites and rituals that an ordained minister can do, but can only perform these in the church where that person is licensed. The licensing is not recognized outside that church community, so the pastor may not perform functions such as communion, weddings, or baptisms except in that church.

²² “Out” in this context means that I am open about my homosexuality and live my life openly as a gay man. I do not practice celibacy and I am not willing to practice it as a requirement for my own ministry.

their dynamic and gifted presence in the church. How can they address these issues as a justice congregation? The questions asked, though not all as successful in the way I had hoped, were geared to address the following:

- 1) What does “Open and Affirming” mean to you?
- 2) What has been your personal experience with the “Open and Affirming” process at Fullerton, both positive and negative?
- 3) Who do you say that Christ is, and what good is God doing through Christ? How, then, does homosexual practice demonstrate that well? How does it contravene that good?
- 4) If we are all gifted creatures of God, then why do you think that so many in the church feel homosexuality is against God and against what God set out for creation?
- 5) Discuss your feelings and ambiguities (if there are any) about ordination of homosexuals, same-sex unions, and homosexual couples adopting children. What do you think the church, and in particular Fullerton, can do in order to create a space to discuss these issues in a loving and compassionate manner?
- 6) How do you feel about what the Bible says in relation to homosexuality? How does this affect how you view those issues in the church today?
- 7) What direction would you like to see the “open and affirming” process take in it’s continuing mission at this church? How do you see us reaching out to other churches that do not agree with us?

8) In what ways would you like to see Fullerton reach out to the community of homosexual and heterosexual families and friends?

The questions asked, though not exhaustive, brought some expected and some unexpected answers. The first questions received the unanimous response of welcoming diversity to the church. The simplest response covers it all, from an eighty-four-year-old female. She answers: "We extend a welcome to people of different races, political affiliation, economic condition and sexual inclination." All the answers were the expected ones. In mentioning acceptance of sexuality the words used were, "inclination," "preference," "no desire to make them heterosexual," "orientation," "honoring relationships," and "diversity is affirmed." This tells me that while everyone may use a different term, all believe that all people should be welcomed. I did find the "no desire to make them homosexual" interesting, because I think this indicates how the system has influenced our thinking about choice in the matter. To make someone something says that some people can be molded against their will. I think while this person may have meant well, "make" may indicate a belief that choice is possible. Then again, it may simply show the diversity of responses that one can expect in a community like this. Everyone may be on the same "page" in the big picture, but when it gets down to it, they may support one part and not another. People are complex and diverse. This comes up more prominently in other questions.

Responses to the second question were also fairly homogeneous, with some variance again in keeping with the diversity of the congregation. Most people felt that the experience with "open and affirming" at Fullerton was both negative and positive. The positive was the "acceptance of new members who are openly gay," "being proud to

have been a part of the committee to implement the process and the acceptance of gays and lesbians into the church,” “my partner and I [lesbian couple] are part of the results, [the] church was [a] positive experience for my partner and I and our son.” The negative reaction was the loss of members who had been there for some time. These are expected responses. We have the joy of accepting the new and different, and the grief of losing the old. It is painful to lose friends over justice issues. Not being able to keep all opinions under one roof is one of the great difficulties in dialoging about homosexuality within the church community.

The third question was meant to bring some specific theology to the questionnaire by finding out what people felt about God’s revelation to the world and how that might affect their views of homosexuality. If God is love and Christ is that incarnation, then how does that influence our views on homosexuality? Likewise, God created good and how does homosexuality reveal that good, or not? This was a difficult question but most people agreed that God was love and Jesus was the incarnation of that love. One woman, forty-three, who is a lesbian, said that “God is love... homosexual love is love and I believe God gave love, the ability to love to both gay and straight.” A sixty-year-old heterosexual man answered, “Homosexual practice opens up the option of Christ-like relationship regardless of sexuality.” A seventy-year-old female wrote “I can’t really see how homosexuality affects that message [God’s love] since it is about people good or bad whether their sexual practices are homo or hetero.” Another eighty-four-year-old woman said, “Christ is God incarnate, the spirit of love alive in the world... homosexual practice I have come to believe is one way of expressing human love which empowers individuals to be caring exemplary people...” Most of the responses were similarly positive. One

older man, who would not give his real age, had a very scientific response: "Jesus was a man. Whether he is the Son of God depends on a person's religion. I believe Jesus would have been accepting of homosexuality... Homosexuality should not be regarded in itself as either good or evil but merely as a variation in the human race. Just as some people are blond, other brunette, few are geniuses, many less talented, some light skinned, some dark, some tall, some short, some are homosexual." I thought that response, and some others that this person gave (see below) were close to a kind of "natural theology" approach used in the world of science. Just as there are variations throughout nature, so are there in human beings and one should not condemn "natural diversity."

The responses to the fourth questions were a bit more diverse. Basically, most people agreed that power dynamics play a large role in why people feel homosexuality is against God's creation. Power over was one response. Being a victim of the system of education was another. To that a sixty-eight year old male responded specifically: "Homosexuality is a *lifestyle and/or preference* which most heterosexuals have been taught to consider immoral or psychologically 'ill.' So many heterosexuals can't get beyond the early learning." Here the person is himself a "victim" of "early learning" because he uses the word lifestyle and preference. Even though he points out the mistake of believing the "choice" to be immoral or 'ill,' he is still caught up in the belief that homosexuality is a choice or a preference or lifestyle. Discussing this subject with him would involve some further education about the definitions of lifestyle and preference in light of his relatively "liberal" theology demonstrated in the rest of his answers. This shows, once again, the complexity and diversity within answers that generally agree with

acceptance of homosexuality in this community. This was unexpected, a surprise to me, and something for me to think about as I continue to work to create a dialogue.

Question five probably brought the most surprising and diverse response from this community. I think, again, the responses show how support can be given for some parts of the issue, while other parts may not be supported. People pick and choose, in a way, what they can support and what they cannot, within the larger issue. While several responses indicated no problem with ordination, unions or adoptions, others had problems with one or two and not with the other. A seventy-year-old female had no problem with these issues as long as people met the criteria: “enter into each of these positions in a loving and understanding way; to keep faith with their partners, and raise their children with love and care. As for ordination, as long as the education fits the position and they are able to meet the challenge.” This demonstrates how fitting within the whole system, heterosexual and homosexual alike, is the only criteria for these issues. This woman believes as long as one is loving, just, and caring, that is what matters, not their sexual orientation.

But there was interesting diversity of response within the community to this question of ordination as well. One gentleman started out by saying, “I am pro ordination of homosexuals, same-sex unions and gay adoptions. Provide examples of existing gays performing these functions and excelling at them. Make it personal—not wild queers like “Queer as Folk”—just normal folk.” What is normal to him? I would guess that he means having models that show people being caring and loving. However, in quoting the television show, “Queer as Folk,” I would remind him that it does show

models of parenting that are loving and “normal,” that is filled with conflict and ambiguity.

Another gentleman, the one who offered the scientific and natural theological approach, showed a complexity and diversity within his answer that was unexpected. He maintained a very clinical approach to his answers, I believe, and I will quote the answer fully.

Now you are really getting into complexities. Why would a homosexual want to be ordained? Is it because of a true calling to preach the gospel, or to further the acceptance of his/her sexual orientation? I doubt that I would accept a full-time homosexual minister.

About same-sex unions, as previous stated, I believe that homosexuality is a variation and not a choice. One is either born that way or not. If it is a choice, then I believe it is wrong. Therefore, with that belief, I have to accept same-sex unions and support laws recognizing domestic partnerships.

Re: adopting children, again the question is why? Is it just to appear more normal? On the other hand, I do not believe a man who has fathered a child, or a woman, who has borne one, should be denied custody solely on the basis of homosexuality.

Re: discussing the issues, I am not a crusader in this respect.

It seems to me his response he supports part of the issue, as long as it agrees with his scientific and naturalistic approach. But when it varies from that, for example, the idea that homosexuality is a choice, he thinks it would be wrong. So he would disagree with homosexuality being a choice, because it would go against natural law that included ontological variation. I am uncomfortable with his use of the word wrong. That still has a feeling of judgment about it that seems to diverge from his belief in acceptance. It is another example of diversity and complexity in dealing with all the issues. People will

differ point to point while agreeing with the overall open and affirming view. They will support certain things and not support others under the umbrella of the larger issue.

Not accepting a homosexual as a minister, points out a very real situation that I am experiencing. People tend to accept homosexuals into the church as members, or musicians, etc., but when it comes to being a spiritual guide and leader they draw the line at acceptance. Here is the conflict of theology and sociology, which shows that even if one believes God loves all creation, God loves certain members of that creation more when they are in certain positions and less when they are in others. This is not to say that these feelings this man has are shallow and unimportant. This is where dialogue gets sticky and the need to allow all diversity into the discussion becomes an important area to explore. This scientific approach, with its natural theology as a basis, is probably more common than I may think. I need to look at this in light of readings and reflections in order to help create a truly deep dialogue on these issues.

The other important response to this question came from a forty-two-year-old woman. All of her responses to this question were supportive until she got to the part about adoptions. Here she did some serious self-reflection on the question. I quote this part of the answer in full

Honestly, the only line that I find myself drawing has to do with the purposeful conception or adoption of children by homosexual couples. I put this, in my mind and value system, in the same category as intentional single parenthood. I guess I really buy in to the notion that every child has the right to and need for a mother (female) and father (male). Intellectually, I believe persons of any sexual orientation may be loving, nurturing parents, and I would not support limitations on the right of any loving, responsible person to have, adopt or parent a child. But emotionally, and for the same reason that I don't support a single person having or adopting a child when that person is unable to parent the child, I am not inclined to be in favor of homosexual couples adopting children. Even as I am writing this, I am

thinking of examples of same sex couples who I perceive as excellent and loving parents, or who have the potential to be. Perhaps my concern is more for the difficulties the child may face due to intolerant, ignorant people.

This is deeply reflective answer. She reflects about how difficult some of these issues surrounding homosexuality are; how diverse they are; how, when we reflect upon them, we find ourselves not agreeing with everything. I find this response moving and exciting at the same time. It shows me how difficult it will be to get everyone to agree with everything concerned with the issue of homosexuality. There are certain things that people will not agree with while supporting the general ideas. This woman, though, shows a willingness to think and reflect critically on the issues. That is a hopeful sign of transformative education.

Conclusions and Thoughts toward a Model

Needless to say, while only a few responses were returned together, they all showed a diversity of thought and feelings about homosexuality. I was very surprised that those who support me may not want a full-time gay minister or support adoptions by same sex parents. People are different even under a single statement of seeming unity. As the theology discussed in chapter one suggests, diversity is not only the essence of God, but if we are created in God's image we must reflect that essence in ourselves and our communities in order to have meaningful transformative dialogue on difficult issues.

Not all communities accept everything about homosexuality. People, at least in my congregation, are at various places along the spectrum. This means that in order for a church to move forward in this process diversity must be counted and lifted up in the discourse. If, as I have said before, people are not allowed to tell their stories and share

their doubts and struggles, the process will not reflect the transformative model needed to bring the congregation to a new place that reflects everyone's participation and pain surrounding the issue.

While I was shaken a bit by the unexpected responses, I realized that I assumed too much as a researcher. Church congregations while unified in their belief in God and the active creative spirit of Christ, are unified only by their diversity. If that unity of love and compassion is to reflect the image of God and the theology of community, then difference and diversity must be struggled with if transformative learning is to happen. But how much diversity and how much difference are to be allowed in dialogue? The boundary of Open and Affirming is set, but what boundaries do we need? Do I even try to draw a line until the dialogue is underway? Diversity is at best inclusive and transforming and at worst problematic. How rigid will my platform be? Can it be rigid at all? If not, how much flexibility can be allowed so that deep dialogue and transformation can happen? These are important questions that helped to shape the model in the next chapter. It also locates me in a place that may take me out of the facilitator role. How will the dialogue be affected if people know that I am gay and have a stake in the discussion? Can I be totally bias free? Of course I cannot and that may mean finding others to lead the dialogue. These may be heterosexuals who support the affirmation of homosexuality in the church. It may be a team of people where I am just another member and not the leader.

This chapter has demonstrated above all else that people are complex and the model constructed must allow for that complexity in the community, be it the UCC church where I served or in any other liberal church struggling with this issue. The

model must allow for a flexibility that reflects the diversity within each unique community, but must offer general guidelines that help set limits and boundaries so that deep discussion can take place within safety and trust. Each community's approach will be different so the model must allow for that difference. The deep dialogue will come from the community itself and how it sets up the process using some or the entire model in the following chapter.

This chapter has shown that parts of some models work in one situation, and other parts in others. Constructing a coherent whole is difficult as no one set of questions may fit any community. But the basic outline, the safety net set up and the need for trust and compassion are certainly the connecting forces that will provide grounding for fruitful dialogue. The theology of community that must be present in this model allows for that framework mentioned because it not only celebrates the cohesive love of God in the midst, but the diversity that under girds that love. All of us struggle with the issue of homosexuality, liberal or otherwise. We all have complex feelings whether we are gay, straight, bisexual, transgendered or transsexual. We are not all on board with every single issue surrounding homosexuality, but that can be a positive aspect. Without that diversity, as one can see from reading this chapter, there would be no real healing dialogue that includes the entire spectrum of thoughts and feelings about homosexuality. Without diversity, transformative adult learning as described in chapter two would not be successful. Without the grounding of a relational and creative God, the community could not begin to have honest, open, compassionate and a deeply painful dialogue that would shake our very foundations and change us in ways unexpected, yet reflective of the image of God.

CHAPTER 5

The Model

As I have been working on this project several people have mentioned to me that this is a very difficult and painful subject for an out gay man, let alone a pastor, to tackle in the church. I have thought many times, “What an understatement!” I have felt many times like I needed to crawl under a desk and hide. The more I look at this model, even in a liberal church, the more my own faith is tested. But, it is important that even a liberal church continue to dialogue concerning the difficult issues surrounding homosexuality. The “system,” which includes the church, has prevented most of us, on all sides, from connecting with each other in dialogue. We live in a name-calling society, where relationships are put on the back burner in favor of the majority’s viewpoint. In addition, the painful issues that come to the surface in the community are hushed up for fear that people will get hurt.

What sort of model can this UCC church use as a guideline for discussing homosexuality after they have become an Open and Affirming congregation? Even those people who have voted to accept homosexuals have conflicting feelings regarding the various issues for which they voted. People need a model that allows for the full spectrum of positions that people hold, while maintaining compassionate and loving boundaries so that people feel safe to share their stories. People want to know that it is okay to share their pain and work through that pain in deep dialogue so that transformation may happen.

The writings cited in the previous chapters, especially those of Patricia Cranton and Beth Ann Gaede, as well as the contributions of the UCC parishioners via

questionnaire and dialogue, inspire this model. It is partly based on previous work that I have done in school, as well as much dialogue with colleagues in the academic and religious world. It is a model that I hope will help those where I served to move forward in the process of "Open and Affirming" and even speaks to other churches looking to move beyond the vote.

At the Beginning

In transformative adult learning the first step is to assess the problem. Is there a problem to begin with, and who are the important individuals that need to be contacted to confirm whether or not a problem exists? In the church in which I served, there is an Open and Affirming committee that assesses the situation at the church. Since it is a small congregation assessing the situation concerning homosexuality and that community was not difficult. If you have a larger congregation, it might be wise for the council to assign a person or persons to assess the congregation via questionnaire or perhaps set up small group discussions and see who attends. Sometimes, many people who have concerns do not attend, so it is important that in both a large and small congregation the minister preach a series of sermons on homosexuality and the church. At each service people should be given a series of questions that come out of the sermons. A committee to assess what the problem is could then review these questions, and determine if a problem exists. They may also find what issues need to be discussed first and what diversity of opinions exists within the congregation. Here are some sample questions one might be ask; these of course may differ from congregation to congregation:

- 1) *What points spoke to you in the sermon?*
- 2) *What points made you uncomfortable?*
- 3) *With what did you agree? Disagree?*

- 4) *Do you think there needs to be dialogue about the issues presented in the sermon?*
- 5) *Would you be willing to participate and share your views in a safe and comfortable small group session?*

These questions might be helpful to begin the assessment of what problems may exist within the community. These assessments would then be taken back to the Open and Affirming committee and then after discussion taken to the council. It is here, within the UCC, that the decision would be made to continue the dialogue. The Open and Affirming committee should probably take charge of setting up of the first meeting, or meetings. However, it will be important to find some people who are not all like-minded to serve with the O&A committee to insure an adequate spectrum of opinions are represented. How to go about this would involve a letter or announcement during the service offering people the opportunity to serve on a task force designed to look at the situation.

It is important at the beginning to emphasize relationships between participants. From the sermon to the committee meetings, people should be encouraged to relate to each other in open and honest ways. This will not happen right away but with the encouragement of the facilitators (be it the pastor or lay leaders) the process can be encouraged. This is step two. How do we create a fruitful atmosphere for dialogue after the overall problem has been identified? Here are some guidelines that may work.

- 1) *When the committee is calling people or encouraging people after the service or at another social time, emphasize that they will be heard and that their stories are important to the dialogue.*
- 2) *It is important for the group leaders to realize this "gathering" of participants may take several weeks and they should not push people into the groups. Patience is important throughout the whole process.*

- 3) *Advocacy by people known to the congregation is important in witnessing to prospective participants. If gays and lesbians are participating in the preparatory process it might be that they want to have heterosexuals along with them, so that those who may not agree with homosexuality in general may feel more inclined to participate.*
- 4) *Again, be patient and allow the process to occur naturally, though a little gentle prodding and advocacy may be called for in some instances.*

Once people begin to respond, the task force or committee needs to begin the preparation for the first meeting. This will be the most important because it is here that first impressions about safety and trust and comfort will be made. Even the best atmosphere created will be highly charged with tension because of the issues being discussed. The risk is great but the potential for healing is tremendous. What can we do to facilitate the process? In a liberal church, many people are already advocates of affirmation and justice for homosexuals. But as seen in the questionnaires in the previous chapter, this does not mean everyone is in agreement with all aspects of the issue. In a liberal progressive church like this one, people who disagree may be particularly fearful of participating in a discussion like this so their needs must be addressed in this preparatory stage.

The discussion should either take place at the church in an intimate room, or at someone's home. It could take place at the minister's home, but if the minister is gay (like me) it might be best for more neutral territory. People may inflate their opinions around pastors and if that pastor is gay, or it may be difficult for them to express their true feelings for fear of hurting the pastor. It would probably be best for someone other than the pastor to facilitate this first meeting (or meetings, if there are several scheduled with different groups as in a large church). The church may even want to bring in an

expert in conflict management to help in the process, though outsiders may be viewed with suspicion. That would be up to the community to decide.

The time line for this model is flexible. It would be important that people understand that this process is ongoing and should continue in some form throughout the life of the church. New people will come in and they will need to be included in the dialogue. People have an ingrained sense of where they stand on the issues, which they may hold on to for some time. Breaking down the walls will take time and patience and a lot of love but persistence should be emphasized, too. This will be tough to maintain since people may disagree, even in a liberal church, at a deep level about homosexuality. Being centered in the spirit and staying true to the theology of the community will help people create a well from which to drink the refreshing and renewing water of the Spirit in order to continue the process. This model looks at an initial time period of six months to one year, with continuing and renewing discussions once a month. After the first year perhaps meetings could be reduced to once every three months. However, whenever people feel the need, the schedule may be updated to as many meetings as the community deems necessary to maintain the intentionality of affirming homosexuals in the church.

The First Meeting

Safe spaces and trust building are essential elements of the first part of the model. This will happen over time in the process, but this first meeting must be constructed to encourage as much trust and safety as possible. There should be no rushing into the discussion. This is a meeting to talk comfortably with people at the beginning. Coffee and refreshments should certainly be present. The seating arrangement is important. All seats should be as comfortable as possible and arranged so that everyone can see

everyone else. Eye contact and hearing are extremely important to this first meeting so people can begin to think critically about what problems may exist. Friendships are based on mutual respect, as should be these meetings. The facilitator or facilitators may want to watch carefully in the beginning to see who is talking with whom and if they can sense what sorts of tension are in the air.

Lighting should be soft, yet not so dark that people cannot see one another. The leaders will want to start the meeting by gently prodding the people to their seats. Humor should be a part of the evening and certainly a part of the beginning phases. Humor can relax people, as laughter tends to connect us all at a deep level. The leaders will want to appear relaxed yet organized. They must know in general what they want to accomplish that evening. They must also be ready for the unexpected and for some tension to be expressed by individuals.

This meeting and every meeting should begin with prayer. The theology of this model and of the group is that of bringing the relational God into the community in an intentional manner. The leaders may want to ask someone to lead the prayer in later meetings, but certainly the first few should be done by the leaders themselves. The object of invoking the relational God is so that people will be centered in the love and compassion that God brings to the group. It will be the base to which the group can return should the discussion turn tense or tempers flare. It only takes a gentle reminder that we are with God to bring people back to the dialogue at hand. It may not always work though, in which case a private session with the person or persons may need to take place immediately. In that case, a break would be called so people could pull away from

the tension. Once the counseling has occurred and if the parties involved are willing to return, the group may continue.

At this meeting, boundaries for the dialogue must be agreed upon before any real transformative work can happen. It is important to establish with the group that one boundary is already set and that is the vote to become Open and Affirming. Everyone should be in agreement with that one boundary. After this is discussed, then the discussion may proceed. The next question might be how much diversity should be allowed within the discussion? In the case of a liberal congregation that has already voted to be Open and Affirming the boundaries should be the same as any other congregation. At the first meeting the leaders need to present what they feel should be the limits of diversity in order to keep the discussion safe and compassionate while maintaining the atmosphere of openness to all stories. Here are some boundaries that should be presented and agreed upon by the group before the process begins in earnest:

- 1) *No name-calling: personal attacks are unacceptable. If this happens then it is up to the leaders to remind the participants of the Spirit-centeredness of the dialogue and the love and compassion that needs to be shown to all.*
- 2) *Justice must always be maintained in the discussion. People must be allowed to tell their story without interruption. In a liberal church that means allowing those who have problems with certain parts of homosexuality to be heard.*
- 3) *It is important that everyone understand that each person in the group has a right to be heard even if they cause some pain to be brought to the surface.*
- 4) *Accountability is important for everyone. It is the group's job to make sure that people are accountable for maintaining the boundaries of love and compassion and justice in their storytelling. If someone strays into unfair accusations then it is up to the facilitators, with the backing of the agreement of the group to put the discussion back on track.*
- 5) *Because people are from different backgrounds, even in a liberal church (usually these people come from more*

conservative churches that have wounded them in some way), it is particularly important to continually support them as they begin their tentative attempts to deal with very sensitive issues.

- 6) *Are we in agreement with the Open and Affirming vote as a general justice statement? (This may be asked first if desired, but it is important to review this boundary).*

Some of these points overlap, but it is most important to remember that diversity is achieved only when justice is served and compassion maintained. Justice means that everyone tells their story, agreed with or not by the others, as long as they attempt to stay in keeping with the boundaries of compassion and love set by the group.

Once the first meeting has settled on these boundaries then there needs to be a break in the action. Setting boundaries can be stressful, especially at first, since people may be suspect of the whole process and whether what they have to say will be heard. In a church like the one researched here, it is very important that people be included in the process of boundary setting and feel valued. In a liberal church, where people might not understand why others, who voted to become Open and Affirming, yet do not agree with all the issues discussed, the group might want to address this by helping all the participants understand that the boundaries set will allow those who disagree with the majority to feel they have a voice.

After a break and refreshments, if there is time in the evening, people should return to the group and begin setting the agenda for the next meeting. This will take place after a reflection on the evening's proceedings, which should take place after every meeting held. This reflective part should include questions that the group looks at to help review the evening's discussion and see where the group will go from there. It may be that another meeting dealing with the same issues is necessary before moving ahead.

That will probably be the case more often than not given the volatility of the issues. That

is part of the process and it should be emphasized to the group that it is fine. This is a long process and sometimes the discussion will plateau on certain issues. These must be worked out however long it takes. Therefore in the reflections, these judgments take place. After the first meeting is over, questions such as the following might be asked:

- 1) Do you feel the boundaries set in this first meeting will allow for fruitful dialogue around these issues in future discussions?*
- 2) What, if any, questions might you still have concerning what has been discussed in this initial meeting?*
- 3) Are there things we did not address that we must address in the next meeting?*
- 4) Should the dialogue continue? If so, why? If not, why?*
- 5) Did everyone feel that they were heard during this meeting?*

These reflection questions are simply guidelines and may be adjusted according to the group. They may also be used as reflection questions in other meetings.

Once the reflections are finished the agenda may be set for the next meeting. As was mentioned this might include unfinished questions from the first meeting. If so, then that should be the first on the agenda. Given the diversity of each church community and the differences that exist, time should be flexible, as should the agenda. Basically, though, the facilitators should follow a basic outline, shared with the group. Now we should look at the general model I have proposed and understand that the agenda questions asked and time lines may differ. This model is simply a suggestion for those churches continuing their Open and Affirming process. Many of these questions may have been covered in the initial process that led to voting, but need to be addressed again in some form as the diversity, which exists, needs to be addressed within the congregation. This model may be reconfigured for the individual community that is

using it. For the UCC church addressed here, this model will probably change and grow as the process continues.

A Transformative Model in Process

Giving voice to the diversity that exists in the liberal church is important. I believe there are six important components to a transformative model that can be used in the continuing process of bringing justice and affirmation to the church community in issues concerning homosexuality. They are as follows:

- 1) *A Theological rethinking of the so-called “clobber texts”¹ used against lesbians and gays and the traditional views that have brought them about.*
- 2) *Relational questions that get the conversation out of sexuality and into the realm of human relationships as criteria for discussion. What about parenting? Is procreation only biological, but can it be social as well? Are committed same-sex unions as blessed and viable as heterosexual? It is not what happens between the sheets, but what happens between two committed persons in a relationship.*
- 3) *Creating “safe spaces” where dialogue can take place without fear of judgment or ridicule.*
- 4) *Storytelling by each participant so that the full diversity of opinions is heard and connections between individuals involved can be made.*
- 5) *Bringing advocates to the discussion and building alliances with other liberation groups so that homosexuals as well as heterosexuals may understand what power they have and feel empowered to act to bring continuing affirmation to all.*

¹ “Clobber texts” are those Biblical passages condemning homosexual practices. These texts are taken literally and used as weapons to condemn homosexual practice and homosexuals. They are used without scholarly study or historical understanding, and accepted carte blanche by most members of the Christian community. Used and interpreted in this manner, such passages cause much pain and suffering to homosexual persons and are, in this author’s opinion, unjust and unfair.

It is important to revisit these texts, including the creation story, as all of these are reasons why people sit on different parts of the spectrum with the issues surrounding homosexual unions, adoptions, and ordination.

- 6) *Finally, creating an atmosphere of trust in which transformation can happen and continuing progress toward peace and justice education can be made.*

Rethinking Theology

One of the most difficult issues that face lesbian and gays in multicultural education today is how the Bible has been and is being used as a weapon. The common term for this type of usage is called “clobber texts.” This comes from the fact that verses from the Bible are used to “clobber” lesbians and gays, to beat them down using Biblical passages. In education this is a delicate issue to deal with, because the belief that the Bible is the “word of God” and inerrant makes any sort of transformative work nearly impossible. How do we ask the questions and hear the texts in new ways that will help lesbians, gays and straights enter into a dialogue that is transforming and healing?

Literature is one of the first tools that should be available to any group in the process of religious education in a multicultural setting. Walter Wink is a theologian who has done much work with “clobber” texts. In an essay available on the Internet,² Wink spends about eight pages with these texts and looks at them, in my opinion, with a keen and fair eye. He first begins by stating the text and then details the historical context in which these texts were written. The listener (if it is a class) and reader can get an idea of what life was like and what religious and cultural practices and beliefs were held. This gives that person a good sense of why these verses were written, what they really meant for that time, and why the meaning cannot be brought forward to the present

² Walter Wink, “Return to Biblical Evidence: Homosexuality and the Bible,” accessed 10 Nov. 1999; available at

as easily as some people might think. After looking at this, the group would have time for reflection and questions. Following are some questions that might be asked:

- 1) *Now that we have looked at these texts, how do you feel?*
- 2) *If these are not literally true, what does this mean for my faith?*
- 3) *Why have we come to believe that the Bible condemns homosexuality after looking at these texts?*
- 4) *What does it mean to me now to say, "Love thy neighbor"?*
- 5) *How do Genesis and the blessing of procreation affect my views on same-sex adoption and what the children of those adoptions may face in school and the community as they grow?*
- 6) *Does this new look at Biblical texts mean the Bible is not true?*
- 7) *How does this mean I look at homosexuals and myself differently?*
- 8) *What does the Bible say about ordination? Can homosexuals be "called" to the ministry like heterosexuals? Has society influenced how we view ordination?*

These questions are only some of the tough questions that should be asked as we look at these texts in a new way. These questions need to be asked in an atmosphere of safety and love so that defenses will not be raised and people can hear what is really being said. There are certainly more questions to be asked, but those will vary depending on the group.

One good image to use in these groups would be to use the Emmaus story.³ This story is about accompanying each other on a journey of healing. We do not walk ahead or behind people but with them. We listen and we comfort and we challenge, just as Jesus did with the disciples on the road.⁴ This alternate use of the Biblical text is a way to create a safe and trusting atmosphere and a demonstration that the educational process is not simply one-sided and that the Bible can be a healing text. Using the Bible in this

³ Luke 24:13-53 (NRSV).

⁴ Robert J. Schreiter, The Ministry of Reconciliation (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998), 42.

way also helps those who are fearful of change see the other ways the Bible can speak. It can be transformative as it creates a space where dialogue can occur. Looking at the texts both historically and contextually, as well as asking and reflecting in a safe and trusting atmosphere, we can shed new light on these old texts. That could help people to see that their misuse and misinterpretation of these texts could lead us far from the meaning God may have intended.

In addition, the dialogues happening today in the church surrounding homosexuality should be looked at in the group. These dialogues, as discussed in chapter three, will use these various “clobber texts” as the basis for the construction of their arguments. Either Seow’s or Sample’s books (or both) mentioned in the previous chapters may be studied in the process. Seeing these discussions will help the group orient themselves to the discussion. Walter Wink’s book that deals with the texts and how they relate to today’s discussion would be good as well. Finally Robin Scrogg’s book would be most helpful and perhaps the best one to read concerning the texts themselves. It is an evenhanded, non-advocacy, view of the texts that may appeal to the diversity of feelings about these passages. Other important books that would be referenced would be Suchocki’s book on the relational God and diversity⁵ and the other books referenced in the first chapter of this paper.

Relational Questions

Within this same group asking questions about relationships rather than sexuality can help everyone understand each other and listen to each other in ways that may transform. One of the most frustrating questions frequently asked is not one of how do

⁵ Suchocki Divinity and Diversity.

we relate, but how do we have sex? Immediately the conversation becomes adversarial because people view their sexuality in different ways. For example, a straight man cannot possibly understand how two men can have, or would even want to have, sex with each other. Of course that makes sense since a straight man finds women sexually attractive but not men. The idea of the mechanics turns him off. The same is true of a gay man trying to understand how a straight man would want to have sex with a woman. However, if we ask questions from the standpoint of relationships, then we can ask, “What difference does it make as long as two people are committed to each to each other and love each other?” Here we have taken the questions to a human relationship level and out of the arena of sex.

Sex is the great divider in the debate about homosexuality. In religious education it is particularly intense because of some religious taboos about sex. Society and religion in some areas of the world secret sex away behind the bedroom doors and makes it something titillating and dangerous. What we cannot see, we guess about or fear. The church has done much to encourage this sort of behavior. Sex between a man and a woman is the way God intended: “It was Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.” Sex is the basis of the arguments. We fail to look at loving relationships between people, between God’s creatures. So sex, being something hidden and secretive, can allow for some very creative pronouncements about the evils of diversity. If something is not dealt with in the open, it allows for manipulation by those in power.

The questions asked in discussions should be about relationships not about how two men or two women have sex. The discussion will get nowhere, or people are still stuck at, “Oh, yeah, but still, yucky! Two guys going at it?” Obviously, if we have a

sexual “preference” the alternative is “Yucky!” I use that word to show how deep our revulsion to graphic sex is and therefore how far apart in agreement we will be if the questions are not about two human beings being together outside the bedroom.

Some questions might be:

- 1) *What does it mean to be in a committed relationship?*
- 2) *What does the Bible say about love?*
- 3) *What kinds of things do gay couples like to do?*
- 4) *What kinds of things do heterosexual couples like to do aside from sex?*
- 5) *What fears do I have about committed relationships, both gay and straight?*
- 6) *What are our commonalities as a community in Christ?*

It will be important during this part of the model to discuss same-sex unions and about adoptions. Can same-sex parents be as nurturing? Do we need both male and female to raise a child? Is just loving the child enough? The questionnaires revealed that people were uncomfortable with what might happen with the children if they had two parents of the same sex. It is probably true that children will face ridicule in school if their parents are gay or lesbian. How can we prevent this should be a question asked and discussed? Relationally, as was evident in the questionnaire response, it helps to know same-sex parents who are raising children. If they are successful then it is likely that people will be able to accept that family concept as efficacious.

Here are some questions to discuss in addition to the ones already presented above.

- 1) *How do I feel when I see a same-sex couple with children?*
- 2) *What does the Bible say about two people of the same gender raising children?*
- 3) *Does procreation have only a biological meaning? Can we procreate by simply raising a child?*
- 4) *What problems do you feel may accompany the adoption of a child by same-sex parents?*

5) *What ways can you suggest that we dialogue with schools and other parents not in our church about adoptions like these?*

These questions or others that the group may think of, as the ones asked before, should be discussed in safety and with trust. These are tough questions, with no easy answers and it is important that the group realize they do not have to solve the problem right then and there. It is a process.

Safe Spaces

How are these spaces created in a multicultural education classroom or situation?

Do people simply come together and begin working and eventually those spaces are created? Well, in part, yes. The more we talk and question the more we get to know each other and feel safer. However, what do we do at the beginning with an issue so fractious as homosexuality and religious education? The battle lines seem to be drawn. What do bring people to the table? And then once they are there, how do we create the atmosphere where true dialogue (honest and loving and compassionate) can take place?

One of the best places for safe spaces is seated around a comfortable table eating and drinking and celebrating. The table has long been a place where people gather and feel safe and secure and able to share stories with each other. It is a place where, with food and good company people listen and enjoy each other in the safety of someone's home. Table fellowship was central to Jesus' ministry in creating space for everyone, so why should it not be a part of a religious education model? Where better to bring together diverse thoughts and stories in a space that is warm and comforting, where else to practice ministry of healing and transformation than over a simple meal in which we all participate?

Simply because it is a meal does not mean we jump in with both feet, but the stories and the listening come naturally in the process of table community. We even the playing field, all are equal, and all are valued. We should sit at a round table, I think, looking at the persons across from us, better able to hear than at a long table where we feel more separated and less communal. At that round table we can relate in a more intimate way than if we are brought together in a sterile atmosphere of say a meeting hall or other less “safe” place. But that round table does not necessarily need to be in someone’s home, it could be in the church if the right preparations are taken.

Having the community get together for a common meal is one of the best ways to get table fellowship in the church. We can set many round tables together and place people of divergent views or with differing stories at each. This can take place over several weeks or months, as long as the process takes. At these tables the questions of relationships and theology and storytelling can take place over time and with all having the opportunity to share. At each table could be a facilitator who would help guide the conversation while not manipulating and that facilitator’s job would be to maintain fairness and let every story be heard uninterrupted. This is a little more formal than someone’s home, but the effect can be the same. In fact, the home meal could be arranged in the same way, though, as I said less formal. Perhaps home meals have been discussed in worship or in committee groups and the congregation allowed to participate in planning both the meals and program. This is to make sure that everyone is heard so that when the meals happen there are no feelings of being left out, which can lead to resentment and block any transformative learning that could take place. Meals would be rotated from home to home if the plan did not include fellowship at the church.

After these meals and discussions perhaps a sacred space for worship and celebration would be created so that we bring the Spirit into the process in a ritualistic way, which can add weight to the process itself. God is blessing our work. This makes everyone feel validated and valued and allows action to take place bringing the community to new places and new thinking.

The table, in my opinion, is the most essential part of including homosexuality in transformative education. For here we are all equals, here the space is safe and warm and conducive to dialogue and listening. Just as we can be “transformed” by a wonderful meal and good company, so we can be transformed as we sit with one another around a table set for the feast. We hear, we talk, we laugh, and sometimes cry and most of all we connect with each other in a deep and I believe spiritual way that no other venue can offer. Here, I believe God is present and active, urging us through celebration to love one another. Here is where we start the dialogue, here is where we tell our stories and make those vital connections so that transformation can take place.

Storytelling

Stories are part of what we are, of where we come from and what makes us feel the way we do. They form our very being and are vital for us to tell if we are to be a part of the community of creation. Storytelling can take many forms, from personal experience stories to poetry, music and drama, and even dance. The important part about storytelling is that the teller be heard. That involves people letting the whole story be told without interruption. People need to allow the space for listening in order for the storytelling to be a transforming experience. If the story is interrupted because others

simply want to tell their story and not listen, the process will collapse into talking to, rather than with, each other.

Stories are connecting pieces that speak on a level deeper than a mere lecture or debate. Stories have emotional qualities that all real listeners (those who sincerely create their own space for hearing what is said) can relate to and therefore see a commonality they might not have noticed previously. If I tell a personal story about being called a “faggot” and jeered at or perhaps even physically harmed, people connect somehow with moments in their own life that helps them see my story in a new way. My personal story may trigger a story that they can tell about their own pain and suffering which can move all parties toward a new story together, one that heals and transforms all involved.

Drama or even role-playing in improvisations is one way to help tell a story. It accesses a deeper region within us that can allow the Spirit to enter and heal. One kind of improvisation might be where people are given only one premise and they must improvise a scene from there. Improvisation causes us to drop our defenses since we are really not given time to think and prepare, but to just act on instinct. Instinct is a deeper place where defenses have not been established and prejudices can be brought out into the light. We can better reflect afterwards when we can see the naked truth about others and ourselves that might otherwise be couched in defenses and hidden behind pleasant faces. Of course, issues are better dealt with this way, in the open, rather than hidden away and forgotten. The following are some possible scenes, which might bring to light stories on both sides and allow for some critical reflection. Setting the stage, so to speak, would involve explaining that anything goes in improvisation and that nothing is a

personal attack. The safe space should have already been made and people know each other. This is essential before attempting improvisation. Here are some potential scenes.

*Confronting a person who declares that homosexuality is a sin.
 A young person tells a parent of her or his homosexual orientation.
 A married person telling a mate that it is over because _____. (Improv)
 A gay or lesbian couple breaking up because one partner chooses to "go straight."
 A gay or lesbian ministerial candidate affirming his or her sexual orientation and requesting ordination.
 A church member expressing the view that homosexual behavior "is okay if it is done in private but there should be no public display of affection."*

After these there would be a reflection time where questions like "How did you feel?" or "What new information did you get?" would be asked. Because people improvised serious situations like this with no time to think, feelings and prejudices will be brought out and dealt with more easily. Of course, this must be another gentle, loving and safe time where nothing is pushed and people may speak their feelings without fear of judgment. Whether or not people speak up does not mean that they will not have been affected or changed in some way later on in the process.

Music, poetry and dance are other ways to help in storytelling. However, the most important part will be the reflection time afterwards and the questions asked by the facilitators in the group. All of the arts access our deepest regions in ourselves, those areas are where we find our connections that help us to see each other as children of God and not people who should be shunned or rebuked. The questions that are asked after these events can therefore be more probing and more critical. Here are some questions that might be asked after storytelling, understanding again that we have created safe spaces for dialogue and sharing without judgment.

1) Do you feel more or less polarized from the homosexual or

- heterosexual community? Why?*
- 2) *In what ways, if any, are you not comfortable with your sexuality?*
 - 3) *Having heard these stories and knowing that we are in a safe space, share your honest thought with each other about the following subjects:*
 - a) *Parenting by lesbians and gay men.*
 - b) *Adoption by lesbians and gay men.*
 - c) *Ordination of gays and lesbians in the church.*
 - d) *Gay legal unions.*
 - e) *Spousal benefits.*
 - f) *Myths and stereotypes.*
 - g) *Military service by gays and lesbians.*
 - h) *Discrimination based on sexual orientation.*

These questions may be asked because the group at this point in the process has created safe spaces. These questions should be returned to at various points as the process continues, as they will not be completely dealt with in one or two sessions and will probably change throughout the process.

Advocacy and Alliance

Another very important step in my educational model is building alliances and finding those who can act as advocates within those alliances. Advocates are important for helping lesbians and gays have a voice that either has more power in the social arena than they do alone or that can empower lesbians and gays to speak on their own. It is probably most useful to find a “straight” advocate with whom to form alliances as other “straights” will tend to listen to “their own kind” before they will listen to those different from themselves. PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) is one of these alliance/advocacy groups. This group witnesses to parents dealing with their children being gay as well as to those who are friends. The strength here is that being a parent can cross lines that would not otherwise be crossed. All parents can identify with the pain of their children. Having parents talk with other parents can help those parents who are

having difficulty dealing with their own children or their own friend's work through issues. Common ground can be found so that understanding is clearer between parties. The power of having "straight" parents talking about loving their gay children, or "straight" friends (like sports teammates, etc.) talking about acceptance and love of their gay friends, can make quite an impression on doubtful, fearful people. They might begin to think, "Well, if so-and-so's parents or friends can accept them, maybe I can too."

Advocacy and alliances can bring power to those who feel disenfranchised in our society. Lesbians and gays can feel empowered to speak up and come out when others who are different stand with and speak for them, against the hatred and prejudice of the world. After all, Jesus told everyone to help the poor, the widows, and the sinners feel part of God's redeeming community. Jesus stood by those and spoke for those who could not speak for themselves. He was a true advocate who, by speaking with and for others, empowered the excluded of his world. He even, I might venture to assume created alliances between conflicting parties. Advocacy and alliance are two powerful tools that can be used in multicultural religious education for lesbians and gays.

Building Trust

Building trust is one of the overarching themes in a transformative religious education model. If trust is not there the process cannot really begin. If trust building does not continue throughout the whole process, the probing and critical questions that must be asked cannot be asked. Trust building is a process from the beginning to the end (if indeed there is ever an end). We build trust by creating spaces for dialogue where everyone is equal and all stories valued. In the beginning and maybe all the way through there are a few exercises that can begin the trust building. Though these are physical in

nature what is involved is trust. These exercises are about valuing each other, about not letting each other down, about standing with each other. These exercises come from acting classes where it is important to build ensemble feelings among actors so they not only work better together but are able to build a truthful show and truthful characters within that show. When actors trust each other they are freer to explore the play and nuance in their performance so that the truth of what is being said can shine. These can be used to create community in religious education since ensemble and community means the same thing only different venues.

1. *Blindfold exercise: One person is blind folded and is led through a maze created by their fellow actors, safely and without letting go. End result: you trust your fellow actor not to mislead you on stage.*
2. *Ladder exercise: One person climbs up to high rung on ladder. That person then faces away from the group that is below the ladder, closes their eyes and folds their arms in front of them and falls backwards. The group below catches them. End result: trust that community will catch you and be there for you.*
3. *Group creates a circle holding hands. One person in the center who is blindfolded. That person runs full-tilt towards the outside of the circle and those forming the circle must make sure the person stays safely within the circle. End result: again, safety and trust building.*

Here then are some exercises in addition to storytelling and the other tools discussed that will help in the trust building throughout the process, and they are fun.

It is important then that trust building happens constantly throughout the process of transformational religious education. It is effective in community building and helping those feeling excluded, like lesbians and gays, feel a part of the community and loved and valued. This can be used in any educational process since trust is an essential element in the transformative process.

Conclusion

Lesbians and gays, like others who seek liberation, seek a voice in creation, a voice of power in a world that looks on them as powerless and voiceless. The model that I have presented is just a beginning, of course, but offers ways to help give voice and power to the diversity that exists in a liberal community, or perhaps any community. It is far from perfect and like the process itself must be constantly renewed to find new ways in different contexts to transform and heal the issues that surround homosexuality which plague our churches and society. It must start small, with only a few people possibly who can be empowered to then go out and make disciples of people. The process must continue until everyone is involved and at which point systemic evil can be confronted. Our institutions then can be changed so that the exclusion of lesbians and gays will never happen again.

We, as religious educators work with the Spirit, which is the only real reconciler in this process. Without the Spirit, the relational God, the process is too overwhelming, too “evil” to overcome. The relational God must be invited into the process. It is a partnership, a working relationship with God and therefore with each other, that brings about true transformation in these suggested models. Prayer is an important part of the process as well as looking at the Bible and our traditions in new ways that offer inclusion rather than exclusion. Seeing the healing, reconciling power of the Incarnation helps bring diverse parties and cultures together with the commonality of love and compassion that are needed in the process of healing.

To me, this is why table fellowship is so central to my educational model. All people come together as equal partners at the dinner table, especially those who seem to

share the same opinions. It is at the table we create that diversity discovered within our own families and lifted up. We eat, laugh, talk, console, cry and sing at the table. We celebrate our stories and our pain at the table. Because Jesus consoled and healed at meals, so do we. God is present in communion and when we work our models of religious education around that communion table, the power of the relational God is with us and transformation can be achieved. But we must do our part, we must use tools like I have given, in order to invite God into our midst or recognize that God is present. God's healing love can then begin its transformative power to create new beings and bring us together as children of God's creation.

This chapter has looked at a model for a liberal church that has voted to be Open and Affirming. It is meant to suggest guidelines for facilitators and participants so that diversity can be uncovered and discussed, and thereby allowing the process of affirming dialogue to continue. The importance of diversity within the church community cannot be emphasized enough. If we do not reflect the communal image of God in Trinity, then we are not living the Incarnate Spirit that is active in creation. We are meant to be different and celebrate those differences, but we are also meant to connect in the depths of our own spirit with the loving eternal creative Spirit that we choose to call God. This model may help to scratch the surface and with God's help and our perseverance and relentless compassion it can happen. Not many burning bushes will appear in this process, but a smoldering bush will be found in every meeting if the spirit is maintained and the relational God is present.

CHAPTER 6

Reflections and Conclusion

In the previous chapters we have seen that the grounding for this model dialogue is connections and relationships. The only way this project will work as transformative is if the God we call upon is relational and the image of God we reflect is Trinitarian. This is foundational to the entire project. In addition, it is important that we recognize diversity and lift that up as essential in creating a table for dialogue that is transformative in nature. If the liberal church cannot do this, then it will probably not get any further in the process of affirming difference, especially in terms of homosexuality.

If we are grounded in a relational God who demands diversity and difference then we can move ahead in a way that will celebrate the opinions and thoughts concerning homosexuality on the spectrum. It is not enough to simply agree with the general vision or to simply vote on being an Open and Affirming congregation unless all the differences and diversities within the community have been heard. This is what transformative education is based on as the reader has seen from this project. Difference is essential and the tension in that difference is what we struggle with in discussing issues like homosexuality.

No one can be left out, and in the model I propose, I try to ensure that does not happen. The table built will never be sturdy if all the elements are not included. As Paul

says in his beautiful “hymn” to the church and the body, no part can do without the other.¹ Every difference must be brought to light and discussed and loved and lifted up before the table is strong. This table reflects the banquet table God has prepared and that table is built on difference and diversity. In this project, I have tried to lay the groundwork to that end. The theology, education and research done here as well as the model set out in the previous chapter, are geared toward that end. A true table for dialogue in relational theology and transformative education is one built on difference and diversity, not sameness. It is power with, not power over. There is no hierarchy that puts people “in their place”. The playing field is level for all participants.

Parts of this model may not work for all liberal churches. Some churches may be further along in the process and may already have a model in place for continuing discourse on the issues surrounding homosexuality. If so, that is good, but there may still be some things in this model that those churches can adapt. Other churches may have just taken the vote to be Open and Affirming, or something similar (i.e. non-UCC), and therefore would benefit from looking at this entire project paper and seeing if it speaks to them in some way. If so, then they can use it as a template to create their own model. This model is simply meant to be a guide line, since the transformative model must come out of the community it is meant to serve.

While the overall project may meet certain community’s criteria, there are other parts that may take more time to discuss. Theology will be a difficult issue since relational theology or process theology, as I have put it, is not a common approach in most churches. Of course, if the Trinity is used as the basis of the theology and we see

¹ 1 Cor. 12 (NRSV).

that the Trinity is communal and not individual, then even those churches with a more traditional theology may find some parts of relational theology that will work for them. In other words, even if the church has a hierarchical system of beliefs, understanding the Trinity as three different “persons” working together may be able to get the dialogue off to the right start by understanding how important relationships are.

A transformative model must be based in connectedness between participants. We must have a model where people can see their commonalties in their differences in order to have the fruitful dialogue necessary for transformation. All stories must be heard, and I have set up a model that strives to do that. Through drama, storytelling, listening and trust exercises, the community can move to a point where they may open themselves to each other in a paradigmatic way. All of the exercises and questions in my model are geared to get people to open themselves up to dialogue, dialogue that enables transformation and progress.

Is this model transformative in the sense that it includes everyone? That is a difficult question to answer conclusively. This model tries to open the possibility for all to participate. But not everyone who is invited will come. God invites everyone to create the banquet table, but not everyone decides to participate. This model can only do so much and then it is up to the community. Some will not want to participate in the process and the community should accept that. However, every effort must be made to create an atmosphere and model that will open the possibility for all to take part. If this is done and people still do not wish to participate, that is fine. It is important that the process move forward with or without these people. Perhaps, after these individuals see how the model works and that it is truly transformative, they will wish to participate in the future.

A very difficult question to reflect upon is how much diversity is allowable?

This, of course, has to do with what boundaries are set at the beginning. In the liberal church there is much more diversity than people may think. That was my surprising discovery after looking at the anonymous questionnaires distributed to my congregation. Diversity existed, even in a liberal congregation. If people genuinely wish to transform their community and are willing to risk, struggle and live in the tension created by difference, then that diversity is almost limitless. Because this discussion centers on love, compassion, honesty, trust and even anger at times, it is essential to the discourse to include all that diversity.

I think this model allows for diversity. As pointed out in the Chapter 4, there have to be boundaries. First of all, it establishes that the boundary of Open and Affirming is already in place. In addition, there can be no name-calling, or judging, or anything that intentionally belittles someone's ideas and thoughts. Homosexuality is a very difficult and painful issue for the church and absolute safety, trust and loving honesty must be maintained. Each person must be heard with compassion and listen with a compassionate heart. These are not simply shallow emotions, but deep feelings that come from the pain and struggle involved with these issues. I think this model offers the opportunity to dialogue deeply and allow people to share their struggles and pain in an atmosphere of safety and trust, though it is not perfect and will certainly change as to the needs of each community. In this UCC church I researched, which is where everyone knows everyone else, it will work, but boundaries must be set while connections are maintained.

My Lens

This project has been a difficult and painful one for me. I have struggled with my own biases throughout this process. I have at times not seen the ‘forest for the trees’ in trying to create a fair and fruitful model to discuss homosexuality. Being an out gay pastor has presented more than a few problems along the way that I have had to wrestle with in order to bring this project to where it is now. I have dealt with anger, frustration, embarrassment, hopelessness, and helplessness that have brought me to the brink of despair many times. My lens is ground a certain way because of my own uniqueness. This uniqueness plays a part in how I reflect on my feelings and how this project has transformed me.

Many people simply do not trust my motives in all of this. At the beginning of this project, people were suspicious of why I wanted to have a dialogue about homosexuality and the church, particularly in a liberal church. Some of the questions dealt with what I planned to get out of this process. In other words, did I plan to change people’s minds? Why did I want to stir up trouble in a place that already seemed to be quite supportive of homosexuals? The big question asked was if I had an agenda. Did I want to turn the church into a “gay church?” Wasn’t I being as exclusive as the conservatives if I wanted this? These questions, some of which came from the community where I served and some from others outside the church, caused me to reexamine why I was embarking on this difficult journey.

The challenges to my assumptions came to light as I wrote various parts of this project at different times in my research. The language had to change several times because I found myself implying that what I was seeking was a ‘true’ justice. I was

advocating that my truth was the right truth and that people needed to agree with these issues or the church was doomed. I found that my anger was seeping into the text. In my discussion of Stackhouse in Chapter 3, I found that I was not tolerant of the diversity that I had championed in this project. I was being as exclusive as those people I accused of exclusivity.

My exclusivity was in danger of being carried over into the model. The questions I asked were slanted in the direction I wanted to go and not necessarily the direction of the community. I assumed that my congregation was in total agreement with the Open and Affirming stance taken and I failed to recognize or even acknowledge that difference might exist.

What the experiences of the project have shown me are that as a pastor, gay man, and a possible facilitator of transformative adult learning, I must be vigilant about my own biases. This is difficult to do when there is a deep emotional attachment to the issues surrounding homosexuality. I have been dealing with my own anger toward the church for decades and it has only been through rigorously painful reflection that I have been able to present this project. I am still not sure it will do much good. I think it may help people dialogue, but I doubt it will change many minds, at least early on in the process. There is so much that needs to be discussed and struggled with, such as theology, sociology, culture, family and other systemic issues that it may take several lifetimes of dialoguing for any transformation to occur. But, as this model proposes, it is the dialoguing that is important, not reaching a final conclusion.

The systemic homophobia that exists in society will make it extremely difficult to dialogue about homosexuality in the church, even a liberal one. This is because almost

two thousand years of church history has told us that homosexuality is against nature and God. The resistance to homosexuality is practically genetic. In other words, we have these assumptions so deeply ingrained through our history and traditions that it will take decades to transform our thinking toward a more inclusive world for homosexuals. It will take much effort and pain to work through these issues that surround homosexuality.

I have learned patience and compassion working on this project. I started out four years ago angry and frustrated with the church and with people who seemed to ignore the issue of homosexuality in discussion about justice. (Some people did not even see homosexuality as a justice issue!) As I continued to struggle I became less angry and more understanding of the diversity that exists in others and me. I mean, because I became aware of the complexities of my own feelings about my homosexuality and homosexuality in the church, I could see connections with those who disagreed with me. The connections were in our pain, our struggle, our doubts and our anger. It was also in our mutual fear of difference. I was as afraid of their difference as they were of mine. This helped me to open myself to other thinking that I did not want to hear, but needed to hear. I had to struggle if I was to hear other voices, just as those with whom I disagreed had to struggle to hear my voice.

As a pastor, these struggles with my own feelings about homosexuality those of others who disagree with me have given me a new perspective as to the success of this model. I realize that I may not be the best choice to facilitate or lead this process. I think that I have too much at stake to keep an even handed process going and if I did participate I would definitely need someone to co-lead with me. It would be difficult for me to stay out of the process, but for the sake of trust building and safety it might be best.

I want people to feel that they can speak freely and I am not sure if someone like me would help them feel they could do that. This is true whether the group is conservative or liberal. Conservative individuals might feel that I had a secret agenda to change their minds and turn the church into some kind of “gay church.” Liberals might inflate what they tell me in order to avoid offending me or seeming out of touch with the liberal, progressive mainstream that agrees homosexuality should be lifted up and celebrated. So it is probably best that a gay pastor not be the one to push this model, but instead someone who is an advocate for the cause, but not so personally attached to the issues. This, I would say, could be applied to other justice issues as well.

Hopefulness

I am hopeful that this project will offer churches a way to discuss the difficult issues surrounding homosexuality. It will be a long and painful process, something from which most churches shy away. But I think if God remains at the center and relationships are given priority over who is right and who is wrong, some dialogue can happen. This will take time and the participants need to know that it is okay to take time. They also need to realize that they are not necessarily working for a solution, but working towards connecting to each other in a way that can move them toward a new, more inclusive place. Not everyone will agree or want to participate, and that is okay. Those who do participate will hopefully find they have changed their assumptions and have found a compassion for difference. Simply understanding that there is diversity and that diversity is part of God’s creation means this sort of model can be successful. It may not be a tectonic shift in paradigms, but even small steps are progress.

Homosexuality is a justice issue that needs dialoguing in the church. Hopefully, no one will be left out of the discussion as the table is built by each member of the congregation. If everyone participates the table will be strong and lasting. Just as a relational God is a God of strength because of the diversity inherent in God, then our table and our community will be stronger because of the diversity within it. This model attempts to make the table strong for dialogue. It is a beginning and will hopefully empower congregations to build their own tables for dialogue that will transform and eventually heal the painful struggle surrounding homosexuality.

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